



THIS TENDER PRIZE

Nancy Morse

*Across the continents, upon
the raging seas, love pursued her,
haunted her...conquered her.*


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Tossed by Fate . . .

Caught by Love . . .

Juliette Le Roy—she was a fragile flower of the French court, until forced to fight for her honor, her fortune, her life. . . .

Trevor Kenmare—her husband, his cold indifference is fed by a dark secret he can never reveal.

Stephan d'Ajasson—charming, irresistible Frenchman, his love for her must remain forever unspoken.

Ramir Tabori—the desert prince, he offers her an empire as proof of his love.

Captain Christian Youngblood—arrogant, ruthless, his struggle with his past stands in the way of the love he would deny.

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England, 1770

A gray mist hung over the cemetery at Bishopsgate, wrapping all of Cornwall in a chilly shroud. Overhead the autumn sky was bleak, and the October westerlies blowing in from the sea carried the icy promise of winter.

The sun had not shone for days as though it, too, were solemnly observing the passing of Edmund Kenmare, tenth Duke of Amherst. No ray of light shown down on the open grave and the bowed heads of the mourners standing in silent respect.

These were few. The Kenmares were a small, select family, of noble lineage but few descendants, reaching far back into Britain's history. At present, for example, there was a third cousin who was Governor of Virginia Colony, a niece who was the wife of an Austrian prince. The family scattered over two continents, there were no cousins, aunts, nephews, or the like to clutter the private services. Only the dead duke's son and heir, Trevor Kenmare, and his brother, Lord Alfred Clairborne, Viscount of Kingsbury, represented the family at the grave side.

Trevor Kenmare, the Eleventh Duke of Amherst, stared fixedly at the rectangular hole in the ground to which his father's remains had been committed. His dark brown eyes watched intently as dirt was shoveled into the grave, the shovels moving forward to scoop up a hefty load, then turning in unison to tip the dirt into the gaping hole. The handsome face with its

straight nose, full lips, and finely-structured cheekbones showed no expression. It was impossible to guess what was going on inside of him as he watched his father's grave slowly fill with dirt.

He stood rigid, the only sign of life in his eyes which moved back and forth in time with the shovels. Words were being spoken in his father's honor, but he did not hear them. What he heard was an incessant pounding in his temples that grew louder the longer he was forced to stand there. He was beginning to perspire and could feel his shirt clinging to his back, its ruffled stock unbearably tight around his neck. Licking his lips nervously, he wished the moment away with all possible haste.

Damn him, he thought bitterly, watching as another shovelful of dirt hit the mahogany coffin. Damn him! Even in death he torments me!

Chapter 1

Paris, 1778

It was still too early for most of the residents of Rue Janin to be out and about, but here and there shutters were flung open to greet the pleasant summer morning.

The townhouse at No. 11, a seventeenth-century structure of tall stained-glass windows and ivy-covered stone walls, stood at the end of the street near the intersection with the elegant Avenue Foch. The small walled garden behind the house was radiant with bloom, shaded by an old apple tree whose leaves still glistened with the remains of last night's rain shower.

Juliette le Roy was just eighteen that summer of 1778, and the wonderfully romantic notions swirling in her pretty head were much more exciting than the contents of the letter her godmother was trying to read to her.

"Juliette! Juliette! You have not heard a word I've said!" Enjolé le Roy shook her head. She had tried to be gentle with her goddaughter but the girl's perpetual daydreaming was trying her patience.

"Oh, *Tante*," Juliette said, "how can I think of anything but the ball at Versailles? It's not every girl who gets invited to a ball in honor of the King! It's like a dream."

Enjolé sighed. "I know, *chérie*, but there is more to life than balls."

"Of course," Juliette agreed, laughing. "There is

René! Oh, what a wonderful time we had in Italy. It was so romantic!"

Her godmother eyed her uneasily. "Not too romantic I hope."

She received a smoldering look. "Tante, do you question the integrity of the Vicomte du Montier?"

"No, of course not," Enjolé said. "How could I ever question the good intentions of the nephew of the Comte de Vergennes?"

"How indeed!" Juliette laughed. "What with his mother and two sisters along we were not left alone for more than a moment! Besides, how can you object to René when it was you who introduced us?" She paused, then with a graceful shrug of her shoulders added, "René may not be as handsome as some, but he is very charming and quite wealthy."

As Juliette expected, a glimmer sparked in Enjolé's soft brown eyes at mention of the young man's wealth. She had to admit that, yes, she had arranged for them to meet; the young viscount was considered a very desirable escort. But she had thought that by this time the girl would have left him behind with all of her other suitors. Juliette professed to be in love with each one of them until her interest wore off and the poor man found himself carrying his wounded heart on his sleeve.

Such utter fools did men make of themselves over the girl, Enjolé thought. And no wonder. Young Juliette was a rare creature indeed. She possessed all the things a man considered perfection in the female form: a small delicately-boned face made just right for cradling in a man's big hands, a full rosebud mouth, lips upturned at the corners giving it the look of innocent sensuality . . . lips that a man hungered to taste on his own. Soft dark curls framed her face and toppled over her shoulders, and every man who saw them wanted to crush their silkiness in his fingers. Most enchanting of all were her eyes, the brightest emerald green, exotically almond-shaped, framed in thick dark lashes. Those eyes were the curse of every man who became captivated by them.

But it was more than her astounding beauty that surrounded her with admirers. What young man gazing into those enormous green eyes could resist the fire that burned in them? What man could withstand the magnetism of the wild spirit lurking there?

Enjolé could not be angry with Juliette because God had made her beautiful, but she worried every time the girl danced out of the house on the arm of some handsome suitor, and wondered, guiltily, if she weren't somehow responsible for the girl's wildness.

When Enjolé's husband, the Chevalier Victor le Roy, had died suddenly eight years before, loneliness had prompted her to take the child out of the austere Spanish convent at Torremolinos where she had been placed and into her home. Loneliness had prompted the move, but in the years that followed she had come to love the girl like her own and introduced Juliette affectionately as her niece although actually they were not related at all. Juliette was the daughter of an old dear friend who had died many years ago. She had always been a high-strung, spirited child, and Enjolé, repelled by the strictness of the convent where she had found her, had hesitated to curb that spirit.

Enjolé looked at her tenderly, regretting the task she had to perform this morning by revealing the contents of the letter she clutched in her hand.

"*Chérie*," she said softly, "you must understand that there are times in life when we must do things that are very difficult."

Juliette eyed her suspiciously. Enjolé was certainly acting strangely this morning. Where was the wit and frivolous gaiety that was so much a part of the lively woman? Why was her usually laughing voice so sad?

"What do you have there?" Juliette asked, nodding at the letter. "A letter from Papa perhaps?" She did not bother to hide her bitterness. "Let me see, the last one I received was about four years ago and said something to the effect that he was fine, that he hoped I was well, and that he would write again. So? Has he?"

Enjolé shook her head gently. "Juliette . . . , Juli-

ette your father is dead. He was killed in a duel. . . .” Stunned, Juliette heard the words but could not believe them. She listened as Enjolé read the letter she held, at first numb with shock, then with growing rage.

It was not the news of her father’s death that upset her and brought this perfect day crumbling all about her—she could feel little remorse over the death of a father she scarcely knew. Nor could she summon any indignation at the way in which he had met his end. It was fitting, she supposed, for a man as callous as her father to die by another man’s sword. No, it was not his death or the violent way it had come about that outraged her. It was his endless insensitivity to her wishes! First, after her mother’s death, forcing her to enter the convent at Torremohinos so he could be rid of her while he sailed the seas on one of his many ships. Now this outrageous posthumous wish . . . no, *demand* . . . that she marry a man she had never set eyes on!

“I cannot believe it!” she stormed at Enjolé. “Married? He has arranged for me to be married? To a total stranger?” Her eyes glittered and her face flushed scarlet. “Does it not matter what I want? I don’t wish to be married, Tante! And if I did, then it would certainly not be to some stuffy Englishman. It is preposterous and I’ll have no part of it! As of now, my life is my own to live as I choose. I will take the Black Star Line and manage its affairs just as he did. Now that it belongs to me, I can hire captains and . . .”

“No, *chérie*, it is not yours,” Enjolé stopped her. “There is enclosed with the letter a copy of your Papa’s last will. The original is with his lawyers.”

She paused, searching the girl’s face in an unspoken plea to forgive her for being the one to give her such bad news.

“Your Papa has willed the Black Star ships to the man he wants you to marry. It appears, my dear, that if you wish to claim your inheritance, you must indeed marry this man.” At first Juliette seemed frozen in disbelief. Then she began to pace the white-tiled

garden. She was just eighteen but when aroused to anger, she seemed ageless, eternal, a compelling combination of childlike innocence and womanly sensuality. Her flawless cheeks flushed scarlet, her breath quickened. She stalked about the garden like an angry cat, green eyes narrowed, slim body moving with a grace she was, at the moment, oblivious to.

All thoughts but one fled from Juliette's mind. "He never wanted anything to do with me!" she stormed. "First that dreadful convent, now this! How could he do such a thing to me?"

Enjolé sought to calm the girl with a bit of practical persuasion. "You realize, *chérie*, that if you marry this man, you will be a duchess. That is not a title to be taken lightly."

Her good intentions only brought a furious look from her goddaughter. Changing tactics, she said, "I hear he is a very handsome young man. If he looks at all like his father, I believe it. I never told you about my only meeting with British royalty, did I? It was, oh, many years ago when I was just a girl myself. It was at the Theatre Tivoli during a performance of *La Dame aux Innocence*. Seated in the next box was the Duke himself. That is, the papa of this young man you are going to—I mean, you *might* marry. He had come to see Marie St. Pierre, the great actress. He married her, you know. It was a great scandal! He was so handsome. I remember staring shamefully at him while he had eyes only for her. If this young man is as handsome as his papa, my child, then he is quite a catch."

But Juliette would have none of it. Storming up to Enjolé, green eyes flashing, she said, "Surely we would be called traitors! René has confided to me that any day now France will proclaim its approval of independence for the British colonies. You know what that means—war, Tante! It will mean war between France and England! How would it look if I, a Frenchwoman, were to marry an Englishman?"

With a graceful wave of her hand, Enjolé dismissed the objection. "Nonsense, *ma petite*. Besides, you

forget, that your mama was English. So you have every right to marry this man. Perhaps you would even be admired for your courage."

Juliette gave her an exasperated look and rolled her eyes. "The English are so stuffy!" she said. "Such bores. I've never known one who possessed the charm, the gallantry of a Frenchman."

At that, Enjolé smiled. "All the same, I am certain you need only turn your beautiful eyes on him, *chérie*, to melt away any trace of stuffiness in him."

Juliette slumped down on the chaise, her thoughts spinning wildly. How could she allow the Black Star ships to pass into the hands of strangers? On the other hand, how could she bear to give herself to a man she had never seen, as though she were a piece of merchandise bargained and paid for?

In the next instant, she was on her feet again, a familiar look of stubborn determination on her face.

"Today I'll not think about it anymore," she announced, tilting her chin. "René will be here any minute . . . Yvette has my riding clothes laid out upstairs. Later perhaps you will come to Monsieur Loutrec's with me to pick out a new gown for the ball, Tante?"

She did not fool Enjolé with her feigned indifference.

"Juliette, you cannot dismiss this matter as if it does not exist. I dare say, *chérie*, preparations are being made at this very moment for this . . . this . . ." she could not bring herself to say "marriage," so instead she chose: "Arrangement, between you and . . ." She glanced down at the letter, searching out the young man's name again. "Ah, here it is. Trevor . . . Trevor Kenmare, the Duke of Amherst."

But Juliette had already spun around and danced away into the house, leaving her godmother staring after her with a worried frown.

Chapter 2

The graceful stone mansion known as Amherst Hall lay at the end of a long winding drive. Its walls had long since been overgrown with ivy, testimony to a heritage that went farther back in time than the local gentry could recall. In demonstration of the elegance that only wealth and generations of nobility could afford, it boasted white-tiled patios whose marble came from Italy, tall windows—too many to count—whose stained-glass panels had been meticulously cut and leaded by German craftsmen, delicate balconies framed in the finest Spanish wrought iron, and exquisitely sculpted gardens maintained in manicured condition by twenty gardeners.

To the east stretched the countryside; rich, lush green, nourished by the moist Atlantic breezes. To the west, just beyond the rocky pinnacles outlining the coast, lay the ocean.

Martha Ruddy went quickly to the kitchen, hung up her bonnet and put a pot of water on for tea. "Never did like this accursed dampness," she complained, shaking the chill from her bones. "Been housekeeper here 'most twenty years, and I've never gotten used to it."

Turning away from the fire, she drew her shawl tighter around her stooped shoulders and looked at Lucy Pendington for agreement.

Lucy had been at Amherst only a month. As far as she was concerned, it was just about as perfect as any

place could be. The only thing she would have preferred changed was the young master of Amherst Hall.

"He certainly is a cold one," she remarked to Martha as they sat sipping tea.

The housekeeper nodded. "Ay, he always was. I could never warm up to that one myself."

"Why do you s'pose he's like that?" Lucy wondered aloud.

With an exaggerated shrug, Martha replied, "Born that way. It wasn't the accident, that much I can say. He was a stand-offish sort before that."

She went to the cupboard and took down the bottle of gin hidden on the top shelf behind the molasses. Tilting the bottle into her teacup, she explained to Lucy: "About fourteen years ago he had a nasty fall from his horse. It looked like he might not live. Somehow he came out of it, but the Good Lord knows he must've suffered great pain. The doctors were amazed at his recovery 'though they all said the lad'd have to live with the pain for the rest of his life." She paused, reflecting on the memory. "You know, sometimes I'd see him when he didn't think anyone was looking, just standing in a sort of daze with his hands twisted into white fists behind his back, like he was trying hard to bear it."

Martha was unusually talkative this evening. Lucy suspected it was the gin, but she let her talk, eager to learn more about the household. Besides the young duke there was his uncle, Lord Alfred Clairborne, a distinguished member of Parliament said to be on very good terms with the prime minister, Lord North. And the wealth! Lucy had heard talk of sugar cane plantations on Jamaica and St. Kitt, a townhouse in London, a villa on Sardinia, and a house on the Piazza de Monti in Florence.

"You should have heard the way he used to argue with his father whenever he came home from the academy," Martha said. "Sometimes we'd hear them clear below stairs."

"What did they argue about?" Lucy asked.

Casting a quick glance over her shoulder, Martha said, "Mind you, not a word of this to anyone. Not even to Seth, who's sure to spread it all over Cornwall. Dropping her voice to a whisper, a solemn look on her face, she told Lucy:

"One night, about seven years ago—a terrible, stormy night it was—Seth found the old man's carriage overturned on the road to Bridgehampton. When they brought him in, he was unconscious. Seth was sent to fetch Doctor Allworth, and I was sent to the kitchen to fetch the salts of ammonia. When I got to the old man's room with the salts, I saw young Master Trevor standing by his father's bed with this strange, tortured look on his face. At first I felt sorry for him. Then I noticed something that scared the wits out of me. There was such hatred in those dark eyes!

"I heard a sound from the bed and realized it was the old man trying to speak. His voice was hardly there, but one word was so clear it was like thunderclap. I heard it as clear as I hear my own voice now. There it was, at his dying hour, the thing they always argued about. While Master Trevor stood at his father's bed watching him die, it was the *other* one the old man called for."

Lucy was bewildered. "The other one?"

Martha's eyes flicked nervously about the kitchen, then settled back on the girl. "The other one," she repeated. "The old duke's other son."

"You mean, His Grace has a brother?"

"Half-brother," Martha corrected. "The son of the old man's first wife. French she was. Some actress he met in Paris. Made for a juicy scandal when he brought her to Amherst, I can tell you. Of course, I was just a girl at the time, but I remember how the tongues wagged, what with him such a proper gentleman and her so flighty and a commoner to boot. Me, I thought she brightened up the place."

With the help of the gin, Martha's thoughts slid back in time to her first mistress at Amherst Hall. . . .

Edmund Kenmare, tenth Duke of Amherst, had

found his first wife formidable. Marie St. Pierre was every bit as determined and strong-willed as he was. Their marriage was one continuous battle, and some whispered maliciously that the Duke had gotten just what he deserved. It was apparent to all that the rocky relationship could never endure. Edmund's emotions retreated behind a stone wall while Marie's were quick to show. She wanted him to approve of her career as an actress, but he stubbornly believed that the stage was no place for a woman, particularly his wife and especially a duchess. Shrewdly, he had extracted a prenuptial promise that she would give up her theatrical ambitions.

By remaining true to her promise, Marie went contrary to her own nature and, so doing, destroyed what had given Edmund Kenmare his reason for marrying her in the first place. It was her fire and resistance that had attracted him, though he stubbornly refused to admit it. He continued to force upon his wife a passivity he despised in her, and it wasn't long before Marie came to resent him for it. In turn, he saw less and less in her to remind him of the gay, exciting woman he had married.

The quandry—and the marriage—came to an end when Marie threw herself off a cliff at Lands End at the age of twenty-five. She died, her spirit broken by emptiness and her heart torn apart by despair, leaving behind one small ember of the fire that had once raged inside of her, the baby son she had named Christian.

"I tell you," said Martha, her speech beginning to slur from the gin, "that boy was a devil. Took after his mother, all right. Oh, he was a handsome boy . . . jet black curling hair, a smile to melt any heart, and eyes bluer than a robin's eggs with black lashes that would make any woman jealous. He was a good lad but he had a streak in him that set your knees trembling. Sometimes I could swear those blue eyes were looking right through me, seeing my soul all naked and plain like the day I was born. He had a temper, too, that

would flare up quick, then disappear just like *that*." She snapped her fingers for emphasis. "Young Christian was always quick to anger, quick to laugh, but you had no choice but to love him, even his arrogance—and Saints preserve us, the boy had plenty—even that just added to his appeal. He had a way of confusing you so's just when you thought you knew him best, you realized you didn't know him at all." She shrugged and stared into her empty teacup, falling suddenly silent, her eyelids dropping.

"Did the two boys get on?" asked Lucy.

Martha's eyes popped wide open then. "Get on? Lord no, child! They may've been brothers, but they hated each other. Always scrapping, they were. Sometimes it took three footmen to separate them. No luv, those two did *not* get on."

"What happened to him?"

At the question, Martha's kindly old features suddenly sagged lifelessly.

"Well, there was some trouble with one of the girls in Truro. Only talk, mind you, but the old man was furious. He paid off the girl's father to hush up a scandal and sent the boy out to the family plantation on Jamaica to teach him a lesson. Christian thought it all such fun. Several weeks later, we got word that the *Abelard* had been attacked by a privateer. Christian was fourteen when he left Amherst. We never saw or heard from him again."

Silence fell in the kitchen for several moments until Martha broke it. "You know," she muttered, her voice husky with gin and emotion, "if that boy had lived, he'd be the duke now, not that cold fish upstairs. I'll tell you something else," Martha pointed her teacup at Lucy. "That uncle of his, Lord Alfred, he's not to my liking either. Never was and never will be. What with him always somewhere else and Trevor off on his mysterious trips to London all the time, it's no wonder that when the old man died it was Christian he called for."

Lucy wondered what made Trevor Kenmare's trips

to London "mysterious." She was about to ask when the bell atop the doorway jingled, drawing their eyes to it.

"That'd be His Grace now," Martha said, pushing her chair away from the table. "He'll be wanting his tonic. He takes his powders with it. Remember that in case I'm not here when he calls for it." Quickly she readied the tray she would take in to him.

"Where do you keep the powders?" Lucy asked.

Martha shot her a look. "Never mind about them," she said. "He keeps them himself. All you have to worry about is the tonic. Just set the tray down and leave quickly. He doesn't like—"

Overheard, the bell tinkled again, impatiently. Martha looked up, then reached for the tray.

"He must need it bad tonight," she mumbled as she disappeared through the doorway.

Chapter 3

The small eruption of land, its long-dead volcano jutting arrogantly two thousand feet into a flawless sky, interrupted no more than eight square miles of the blue-green Caribbean.

Seamen's charts identified her as St. Eustatia, Dutch territory in the Leeward chain, but throughout the international shipping world, she was known simply as Statia.

Unlike the neighboring islands of Jamaica, Antigua or Martinique, all of which had fine harbors and lush tropical splendor, the rocky little tract of land was unimpressive. Yet, in 1778 Statia's taverns were crammed with traders and merchants, sailors and ships' captains from a score of nations. Her roadstead—that sheltered area along her shore where vessels rode at anchor—was constantly white with the sails of over a hundred ships.

Since the Dutch gave little heed to mercantilism, Statia's port was free, her facilities open to ships and traders from the world over, the absence of any duties levied on goods stored in her warehouses an attractive and profitable inducement to drop anchor in her roadstead. Deservedly, she earned her title of Golden Rock of the Caribbean. She also provided the perfect haven for American vessels eager to evade the stiff navigation acts of the British king.

In retaliation against what was felt to be unjust taxation by the British crown, the colonists swore by

common pledge not to buy from England, and American trade fast contributed to Statia's success. It was easy amidst the flurry of activity on Statia's waterfront to look the other way when an American vessel left port loaded with gunpowder; easy to turn a deaf ear to the grumblings of the British.

Reverberations of the colonists' resistance were being felt around the globe. While Statia continued to thrive, all around were the unmistakable signs of men preparing for war. Inside her dockside taverns men raised their glasses in salute to the plucky American colonies attempting to defy the British crown. Other men sat in darkened corners, faces turned toward the roughhewn walls, whispering behind thick beards, plotting a way to increase their own profits from the conflict.

By this time capturing British merchant ships had become a profitable venture in itself, attracting scores of ships commonly known as privateers. They were fast, privately-owned vessels, well armed to challenge and capture the slower, weaker merchantmen and escape swiftly with their plunder. Most nations spawned these privateers. With Spanish, Dutch, French, and now American privateers cruising the Atlantic, no ship's captain could set sail and be confident that his ship would reach its destination intact.

The privateers, too, found in Statia a Golden Rock.

The sea sloshed against the hull of the sloop *Rebel*, lulling most of the men aboard into a dreamy half-sleep. Below decks a lamp burned low in the captain's cabin, sending soft shadows washing across the low-beamed room. It was a small, neat room, everything in order, everything still with only the sea's gentle wash and the creak of timbers disturbing the midnight silence. The mullioned windows above the bunk had been thrown open to let in the cool, damp air of Statia's harbor.

A long, lean figure lay stretched out on the bunk, one arm crooked behind the head, eyes staring out at the

night sky. Captain Youngblood was tired; a dull ache in his bones and a soreness in his muscles from the strength it had taken to fight the storm and bring his ship safely into port. Statia had never looked so good, considering that the Atlantic had nearly been his grave. After 114 days at sea, he had returned to what for a long time now had been his home second only to the sea.

The crossing had been an uneventful one until three days before when the storm overtook them. They had been running full-sail before the wind, making good time, when the entire Atlantic seemed to fall upon them. Miraculously, they survived the onslaught and were tossed into harbor, alive, although a few of the crew at this moment wished they were not. Jervis, the bosun, and a deckhand, Hudson, were down with the fever while First Mate Willis had contrived to steal ashore last night contrary to orders and was now confined to his bunk with heaves so violent he could neither stand straight nor think about what the captain was going to do to him when he sobered up from his drunken spree.

The captain lay in silent thought, contemplating with grim amusement how easily he had relieved a score of British ships of their cargoes. He had the same fate in store for the *Dolphin*, a British frigate sailing from Liverpool destined for King George's Army in Massachusetts with a cargo of provisions and cloth. Little did the *Dolphin* know that the *Rebel* would be lying in wait out at sea, ready to pounce on her like a wolf pouncing on a jackrabbit.

After that, well, he didn't really like to plan too far ahead. After all, anything was likely to happen at any time. He did recall a vague promise to Stephan to throw in their forces with those of Stephan's good friend, General Marquis de Lafayette, the daring young nobleman on loan to the Americans from the French Government, and Stephan could be damned persistent at times.

Against his will his thoughts moved from the future

to the past. So many memories, ugly reminders of a time he could not forget. Unable to hold them off any longer, he closed his eyes and let memory take him across the years to 1770 and the Massachusetts Bay Colony when, instead of lying lazily on his own comfortable bunk, he had been staring dispassionately through cold, gray iron bars.

How he had hated that pit in the ground which had served as a prison, where the sun never shone, where rats scurried and boldly tried to snatch away his moldy bread, where the earth was always damp and alive with a million crawling things, where the stench of death was ever present in his nostrils.

He had cursed the stroke of luck that had landed him in a British prison. If only he hadn't lost his temper and run that miserable bastard through with his sword. It hadn't even dawned on him that the ill-fated man was wearing the red and white uniform of King George's Army until they placed him under arrest and escorted him to prison, the bloodied rapier still dangling from his hand.

Only one thing kept him alive during that horrible time in prison, one memory helped him keep his sanity. Just the thought of her was enough to chase all others from his mind, and he would have killed any man who spoke harshly of her. That unfortunate British soldier was proof of that. To other men she was only a mass of timbers and flapping canvas, but to him she was like a beautiful woman, one who aroused his deepest desires. The love most men would give to a woman he had long ago given to his lady of the sea.

Her will lay in her sleek hull superbly molded to fill her wildest fancies. Her soul lay in her masts, spiking the sky. Her temper lay below deck in her gunports. Her mind, as cunning and complicated as any woman's, lay in her rigging, an intricate maze that looked to defy all logic yet worked as smoothly and efficiently as a precision instrument. And her heart, her wildly beating heart, lay in her yards upon yards of white canvas,

stretched to bursting whenever the wind was trapped in her bosom, driving her through her element. Yes, she was a living creature to him, a living, breathing, feeling creature of lust and passion and unending visions of freedom.

She was the *Rebel*, a three-masted sloop-of-war, set with square sails to catch more wind. She was a magnificent, indomitable warrior of the seas, at home in any body of water, beneath any sky—from the tropical Caribbean to the treacherous ice-encrusted North Sea. She was partial to the strong winds of the sea, the ones that tested her strength and brought her reckless, defiant nature to the fore. For sheer pleasure she craved the Northeast Trades, those delightfully fresh, strong winds that made her passage through the blue-green Caribbean waters so enchanting. They were the friendly winds of the sea. The *Rebel* knew them as well as she knew the hurricanes of the South Pacific, the cyclones of the Indian Ocean, and the typhoons of the China Sea. She knew them as well as her young captain did, but at that point it was doubtful if he would live to know them again.

Certainly if the governor of Massachusetts had his way he would not. That pompous old fool! He had been dragged before him, wrists shackled behind his back, to hear the sentence passed upon him. Enraged, his round face turning scarlet beneath a curled powdered wig, the governor angrily reminded him that civilians in his colony did not go around killing British soldiers.

"Or has Captain Youngblood's impudence and infamous arrogance gone to his head?" he ranted on. "Frankly, my own feeling is that you should be carted off to England forthwith to stand trial and then hanged, but there are those who feel you should be made an example of. So, once the paperwork is completed, you will be hanged here."

Sometime around midnight on the twenty-third day of his imprisonment, he had been yanked to his feet and dragged out of his cell into the near-blinding

torchlight of the underground corridor of the prison. He expected to be taken into the courtyard, led up the scaffold and summarily hanged. Instead, his guard escorted him to the governor's quarters.

The governor was seated behind his oversized desk, an angry scowl on his face, his powdered wig sitting askew on his head. He was not alone. A tall, slim man dressed in civilian clothes stood at the window, his back to the room.

"Here he is, Ryan," the governor said, giving Youngblood a look of disgust. He turned in his chair toward the man at the window. "You may consider that favor you did for me as paid in full."

The man turned from the window then to look at the prisoner. He was surprised by what he saw though it did not show in his face. He hadn't expected someone quite so young, judging the prisoner to be no more than twenty-one or two at the most. He came forward.

"I would like to be alone with him," he told the governor.

The Englishman's face tightened. "Of course," he said tersely and left the room.

When he was gone, Judson Ryan took the chair behind the governor's desk, making himself immediately at home. Removing a stack of papers from his leather case, he set them before him, staring down at them for several minutes before speaking.

"It appears the British are quite angry at your disposing of one of their able soldiers."

The young man gave him a dry look. "Not in my opinion, he wasn't," came the mocking reply.

"Regardless," Ryan said. "Look at the trouble it's gotten you into. Are you so eager to die, Captain Youngblood?"

Youngblood threw his head back and laughed. It was a pleasant sound, light, infectious, hardly what one would expect from a man facing death. His black, curling hair bounced on his forehead and his eyes seemed to grow lighter with his laughter. Ryan was

fascinated by those eyes. A moment ago, their color had been deep and murky like midnight sapphires. Now they were clear, translucent, and the brightest shade of blue he had ever seen. Amazing, he thought, truly amazing.

Those blue eyes leveled a stare at him when the laughter ceased. "Die?" Youngblood said. "No, I'm not eager to die, it interferes with the rest of my life."

Ryan detected the arrogance he had heard attributed to this young man. "We know a great deal about you, Captain Youngblood," he said, sitting back in his chair. "More than you think. We know, for instance, that your true name is Christian Kenmare and that you are the Duke of Amherst."

All color drained from the handsome face. "If you'd really done your homework, Ryan, you'd know that Edmund Kenmare is the Duke of Amherst, not I." He kept his voice low, but its keen edge was unmistakable.

Judson Ryan inhaled sharply and spoke, without emotion, words that were painfully brief but to the point. "Your father died three months ago. I believe that puts you in line for the title?"

Ryan certainly had not expected him to break down and weep at the news, but neither did he expect the stony silence that greeted his words. It made him uncomfortable and he looked down at his papers in an effort to hide it. "We also know of your close association with James Youngblood and of your brief association with a radical group in Philadelphia some years back. It doesn't surprise me that you chose not to remain with them. A man of your nature would naturally tend to want to do things his own way."

He pushed back from the desk, stood and went to the decanter of the governor's best brandy that sat on a nearby table. Pouring some of the amber liquid into a crystal goblet, he said, "Let me explain why I am here. I owe a special favor to a mutual friend of ours who gave me your name as a possible candidate for the kind of work we have in mind. Ben says it would be a

damned pity to lose such a cunning nature as yours to the gallows and I've always considered Ben Franklin to be a fair judge of character. At the moment, I cannot say what it is about you that intrigues him so, but whatever it is, you owe this visit to his persuasiveness. Time will tell whether he is right about you." Ryan returned to the desk and took his seat again. He looked at Youngblood, expecting some response, but the young captain said nothing.

"I was sorry to hear of the death of James Youngblood," Ryan remarked casually. "Didn't know him myself, but I hear he was a good man."

Christian Youngblood did react then. For an instant Judson Ryan felt fear as those incredible blue eyes blazed at him. In the next moment, the terrible fire in them died and the handsome young face turned away, sadness washing over it. "Yes," came the whisper of reply, "he was a good man." It was obvious that the subject hurt him too much to discuss.

Ryan's remark had not been as casual as it seemed. He knew all about the young man's close relationship with Captain James Youngblood, the privateer who sank the *Abelard* on its journey to Jamaica so many years before, who took as prisoner a boy who eventually became like a son to him. Together they became the scourge of the Atlantic, the boy following in the notorious footsteps of his adopted father. But James Youngblood was dead now, killed over a year ago by . . .

Ryan watched Christian Youngblood closely. "Tell me, Captain, does the name Delacroix mean anything to you?"

Again that terrible fire in those blue eyes.

"I can see that it does," Ryan said. "Yes, we know about that too. . . . I have it all right here." He nodded at the paper before him. "And what is not written here is plainly written on your face."

He read loud from his notes: "James Youngblood, privateer Captain of the sloop *Rebel*, murdered at age forty-three by one Michel Delacroix, French sea cap-

tain and proprietor of the Black Star Line out of Le Havre. Do you know this man, this Delacroix?"

"I've never seen him," Christian said harshly, "but I know who he is, and one day he will know who I am. French you say?" He gave a short laugh. "That may be, but he's been working with the British for years. He even offers them the services of the Black Star ships. Fastest fleet to sail the Atlantic, under the guise of commerce of course." He laughed bitterly. "Commerce, ha! It's British goods those ships carry to British troops quartered here in America!" A look of pure hatred twisted his handsome features.

Ryan leaned over the desk, fixing his eyes on Christian's. "I've no doubt you'd like nothing better than to run that traitor through with your sword. Well, if you agree to work for us, you'll have that chance."

Christian now gave him a hard, penetrating look. "I'll have that chance whether I work with you or not."

Ryan was pleased by the reaction. So, Ben Franklin was right about this young man. He had courage and a stubborn resistance to oppression that made Ryan think Christian Youngblood could be just the man he sought. Yes, he was arrogant, but arrogance was needed for the kind of work involved. Yes, Ryan nodded to himself. Yes, he would do . . .

"So?" Christian's harsh voice drew Ryan away from his thoughts. "You haven't told me what Delacroix has to do with your being here. In fact, you haven't told me who you are or the 'we' you keep referring to and what you want of me."

Ryan answered honestly. "Actually, the Delacroix matter is just a fortunate coincidence. At this point, you must understand that my associates are not eager to be known to you. If time proves that you're a man to be trusted, you'll know who they are."

Rising, Ryan walked to the front of the desk and seated himself on a corner of it. "I can offer you no wages for your services, or recognition of your work. What I *can* offer you is your freedom, your life."

"In return for what?" Christian demanded.

"In return for which we would expect you to work under our instructions. We would also expect you to swear not to betray us."

Christian smiled. "You wouldn't be here if you thought I would."

Ryan shrugged at that. "As I told you, I trust Ben Franklin's judgment. You come highly recommended, Captain. Well, what do you say? Will you work for us?"

Christian Youngblood hesitated. He still knew precious little about Ryan or the men he worked for. All he knew was that his freedom was being offered to him, but he felt uneasy at accepting it blindly.

"I'm afraid," he told Ryan, at last, "that unless you can tell me more, I can't accept your offer."

"Your only alternative is death," Ryan reminded him.

A wide grin spread across Christian's face. "Yes, but the choice is mine, isn't it?"

Ryan conceded that with a nod. "But why should you refuse what I'm offering? Look, you can do whatever you like, go wherever you like. You can even take command of the *Rebel* again and go back to plundering British ships. You would be answerable to us only when we have need of you."

"Need of me in what way? At least tell me that."

Taking a deep breath, Ryan explained in terms brutally frank.

Christian's reaction was hardly what he expected. "You mean, you want me to spy for you?" He laughed loudly. "Why didn't you just come right out and say it?"

Judson Ryan's look was harsh. "Men must do things in times of war, captain, that otherwise offend them!"

"I never said I found spying offensive."

"Well, I do!" Ryan snapped.

Christian eyed him, puzzled. "How does the Governor fit into this?"

"We did him a favor last year when we caught him dipping his fat hands into the King's treasury. Seems

not all of the taxes collected in Massachusetts reached England. We kept our mouths shut but let him know we'd be calling on him some day to return the favor. So, now he's given us you. Well, will you accept our offer?"

Fixing his blue gaze on Judson Ryan's bland face, Christian thought: What the hell, what do I have to lose except my life—which I'm about to lose anyway if I don't go along.

"Yes, I accept your offer. When do we start?"

Smothering a sigh of relief, Ryan turned back to his papers. "I understand that you speak French quite well and a bit of Spanish too. That should be helpful. Since you're English by birth, we may want to send you to England, but we'll see."

Stacking the papers brusquely, he patted the edges and slipped them into his case. "For now, officially you'll be branded as a renegade. A friend of mine in New York is already at work preparing his presses for the story of your sensational escape from prison. The news will spread rapidly and I suggest that you build on your already somewhat notorious reputation. As I said, you may go wherever you wish and do whatever you like. You'll be contacted when we're ready. Don't worry, our people will always know where to find you." He paused, considering a new thought. "I think I'll speak to Stephan about you. The two of you just might work very well together."

Placing the case under his arm, Ryan strode toward the door, but stopped halfway. "By the way, I don't think I need remind you that repeating this conversation to anyone will result in the death you have narrowly escaped today. There is one more thing, should you ever be caught and questioned, we will naturally have no choice but to disavow any knowledge of your existence. Do you understand?" Christian nodded.

Those strange blue eyes narrowed. "Of course, but there is one thing I want you to understand. I'll not use my title in any way, for any reason. I divorced myself

from that many years ago and I'll not go back to it."

Judson Ryan shrugged and reached for the door. "For now, your true identity will be kept a secret, but some day, Your Grace, you just might change your mind."

Chapter 4

A soft tap at the cabin door pulled Christian's thoughts away from the past. Wondering who would call on him so late, he sat up in the bunk, calling: "Come in."

The visitor who entered would have been unwelcome at any hour. Youngblood scowled at him. "What is your business aboard this vessel?" he demanded.

The caller stepped warily out of the shadows. "Captain," the voice was reproachful, "your tone is hardly fair to someone who brings valuable information."

Blue eyes raked over the man, noted the expensive suit of clothes, the rings adorning pale, thin hands.

"I've made it clear what information from you is worth to me," Christian said contemptuously.

Sloughing off the insult, the visitor drew closer but cautiously, all too aware of the captain's hot temper. "Ah, but you'll want to hear what I've come all the way from Cornwall to tell you."

Christian Youngblood swung his six-foot frame out of the bunk then and stood. Lean, taut muscles strained beneath the fabric of his full-sleeved shirt as all weariness fled from his body. His mind was alert now—and wary. "I'm in no mood for games, old man. You're here, aboard my ship, and it had better be for a damned good reason or you'll not leave it alive! The fact that you are my uncle counts even less in your favor! Now, what do you want?"

Lord Alfred Clairborne, Viscount of Kingsbury, removed from his waistcoat pocket a ruby-studded

snuff box. Placing a bit of snuff at each nostril, he said, "Would news of your brother be good enough reason, Captain?"

"You came here to annoy me with news of *him*?" Turning, Christian stomped over to the writing table, and sat down, giving the man he called uncle a calculating look. "Tell me, how did you manage to steal away from Trevor's watchful eye long enough to journey all the way to Statia?"

Lord Alfred snapped the snuffbox shut angrily and stepped forward. "My business is my own! I answer to no one. Of course, since these are hardly usual circumstances, I did feel it best to offer him some plausible excuse. I told him I would be traveling to Italy." He gave a short, nervous laugh that brought a look of scorn from his nephew.

"What has Trevor been up to these days?" Christian drawled. "Something truly despicable I trust, befitting his nature."

"There are those who find your own escapades somewhat questionable," Clairborne reminded him.

"But you're not here to discuss *my* escapades, are you Uncle?"

"No, I am not. I came to tell you that there will soon be a wedding."

"So? What concern is it to me if some poor wench has the disastrous misfortune, or sheer stupidity, to wed that weasel?"

"Your interest might be sparked if you knew the lady's name," suggested Clairborne.

Rising swiftly, Christian came up close to him, a menacing look in his eyes. When he spoke, his low voice grated like an animal's growl. "I curse the day you discovered that I am still alive. I should have killed you then."

"But you did not," Lord Alfred pointed out, stepping out of his reach, "and if we can dispense with your dramatics for the moment, I came here to tell you that your brother plans to wed the daughter of Michel Delacroix . . . Ah, I see the news *is* of interest to you."

He chuckled. "Why, how pale you look." His smile, on a face half in light, half in shadow gave him the look of a gargoyle. "I could have sent a messenger, but I wanted to tell you myself."

Growing bolder, he sauntered smugly by Christian. "Of course," he said lazily, "since you have already disposed of Michel Delacroix—oh, don't look so shocked, Christian, I know all about that—perhaps my news means nothing." He shrugged his shoulders. "Only you would know the answer to that. Would you like to hear about the girl? She's quite . . ."

"Silence!"

Christian's bellow froze Clairborne's words in his mouth. He blinked at the sudden fury he had unleashed in his nephew.

"I don't want to know anything about her!" Christian raged. "She carries her father's name and that is enough! Now get out of my sight!"

Spinning around on his heels he stalked to the bunk and threw himself down on it, his back to his uncle.

Lord Alfred watched him for a long moment. Then, smiling triumphantly, he left the cabin.

Christian Youngblood heard him go, sighed deeply and opened his eyes. He stared out the window at a smiling moon. What the hell was she laughing at? he wondered bitterly. Michel Delacroix. The name still made his blood run hot. He thought he had ended it all when he had plunged his sword into the bastard's vitals short months before. But, had he? What did it matter if Trevor married the man's daughter? Why should he care?

The door to his cabin swung open again and a towering young man entered. Without a word, he went straight to the table to pour himself a tankard of port. The newcomer was well over six feet tall, broad and muscular, with long, straight blond hair that fell carelessly into his eyes.

His name was Stephan d'Ajasson, although he frequently reminded Christian that his full name was the Marquis Stephan Joseph Marie Yves du Poirier

d'Ajasson. A French nobleman by birth, he was handsome in a boyish way, with full lips that smiled easily and light gray eyes that sparkled even when he was angry, which was never for very long. For a young man whose education had been carefully overseen befitting his aristocratic position, he nevertheless displayed the most appalling manners on occasion, such as entering a room without knocking.

But one could not be angry with Stephan for long; his disarming nature and boyish smile simply would not allow it. Tonight, however, as he swirled the tankard of port, there was no smile in his eyes and none in his voice.

"What will you do about the marriage, mon Capitaine?" he asked. He spoke English well but with a strong French accent.

Christian shot him a look. "How long were you listening?"

Stephan grinned sheepishly and shrugged his broad shoulders. "I see him sneak aboard the ship and decide to keep eyes on him."

"What makes you think I'm going to do anything about it?"

A wide smile spread across Stephan's pleasant features. "I have not been sailing the high seas with you all these years without knowing what that look is all about."

Raising a dark eyebrow, Christian asked, "Oh? What look is that?"

"It is a look of devilry. I see mischief in those eyes of yours, and I know it is some damned fool crazy thing you are planning."

Christian ignored that. "Do you know what that marriage could mean? The houses of Delacroix and Kenmare united? I can imagine what Trevor wants those Black Star ships for—it's not too hard to figure out. But my uncle, now his motives *are* a mystery to me."

Sitting up suddenly, he said, "Alert the crew. We sail at tomorrow's first light. See if you can get that

no-account Willis on his feet. He may enjoy his ale too much, but he's still the best damned mate the *Rebel* ever had."

"What is our course to be?" Stephan asked.

A sly smile twisted Christian Youngblood's lips. "Saint-Nazaire," he replied. "I have some business in Paris to take care of for Ryan."

"Ah, our shrewd American friend has need of our services again? What is it this time? Last time he sent me into the chambers of a very notable lady to retrieve what he said was valuable information. It turned out to be worth less than this." He turned his tankard upside down, emphasizing the single drop of port that trickled out. "Ah, but I do not mind. The lady, she was *magnifique!*"

Christian laughed. "Nothing quite so romantic this time, my friend. Ryan suspects a leak in the French Foreign Minister's cabinet. He wants us to check on it."

Stephan's gray eyes flashed. "The Comte de Vergennes? That is impossible! The man is absolutely to be trusted, this I know from my days at the royal court. And mon père too, always spoke highly of him!"

"Not the count himself," said Christian. "Ryan is interested in his favorite nephew, René du Montier. It shouldn't take us long to settle that matter. After that . . ."

He hesitated. Best to keep the rest of his plans to himself for the time being, Christian decided. Stephan would never approve. "After that . . . we'll see."

Chapter 5

Juliette studied herself in the cheval glass while Yvette, her maid, fussed fastidiously over her. She watched mesmerized, as her gown's tiny fabric-covered buttons were fastened up her back, her hair was carefully dressed, and her cheeks were rubbed ruthlessly with crushed rose petals until they glowed.

The gown she had chosen to wear that evening was dazzling because of its simplicity. It was of the palest ivory moire silk with thin shoulder straps of tiny rosettes. Below her breasts a narrow sash of green velvet crisscrossed, the color matching her eyes and the slippers peeking out from under the hem of her dress. Her hair was piled atop her head in a dark mass of delicate curls, a few artfully placed tendrils spiraling from the gold pins that held them in place to fall in soft disarray over her forehead and at her temples. Around her neck, Yvette clasped a gold mesh chain studded with tiny cut emeralds. Finally, she placed a green silk fan trimmed with gold lace in Juliette's hand.

Enjolé came into the room then and stood behind her. "*Beautiful*," she said, studying Juliette's reflection in the mirror. "If I had not seen it with my own eyes, *chérie*, I would not have believed such loveliness possible."

Nodding her head enthusiastically, Yvette exclaimed, "*Oh oui!*" pleased that she had had a small part in creating such ravishing loveliness.

Juliette laughed nervously. "I feel half naked," she

said, blushing. If she dared lean over too far, her breasts would surely spill over the low-cut neckline.

Enjolé smiled at her reassuringly. "Wait until you see the others. Beneath their splendid gowns, they *will* be naked."

Yvette's eyes widened at the scandalous remark. "I have heard that the ladies of the court are very indiscreet, but do you really suppose it is true that they wear nothing at all beneath their gowns?"

"It would not surprise me," Enjolé said. Then, putting her finger to her lips and lowering her voice, "I hear that Her Majesty wears nothing at all to bed except, of course, her diamonds."

Yvette gasped, blushing furiously. "But I have heard that His Majesty is so . . . so proper. How does he allow it?"

Enjolé chuckled slyly. "Ah, *ma petite*, but the king does not sleep with the queen, or did you not know? Why do you think there are no children? Louis has . . . how would you say . . . a physical impediment which prevents him from completing the sex act," explained Enjolé bluntly.

Juliette whirled away from her reflection in the mirror to face her. "Tante! Where did you hear such a thing?"

Enjolé smiled smugly. "I was at Marie-Theresa Geoffrin's salon last evening."

Though Madame Geoffrin had never been received at court, because she was only the wife of the bourgeois director of a glassworks factory, for years her salon on the Rue Saint-Honoré had been an alternate court to the one at Versailles. A commoner, Madame Geoffrin nevertheless received royalty regularly, counting among her frequent guests Emperor Joseph II of Austria and King Gustav III of Sweden. Certainly, if one had the privilege of belonging to her select circle, one had access to bits of information such as the story of the king's impotence which Enjolé repeated to Juliette and her maid.

"Ah, but wait," Enjolé said, her eyes dancing mischievously. "All is not lost, *mes chéries*. I have also heard at Madame Geoffrin's that Louis had an operation which has restored him to full competence and that Marie Antoinette is pregnant." She paused for effect before adding: "I also hear that the child may not be the King's."

Juliette drew in her breath sharply. "*Tante!* If the Royal Family heard you say such things, your head would surely be in the guillotine's lunette!"

Enjolé laughed gayly. "Mine and the heads of half of Paris, *chérie*, for it is no secret I have told you. If your own head were not so filled with thoughts of balls and this young man of yours, perhaps you would take notice of what the whole city is talking about."

Turning back to the mirror, Juliette flicked open her fan artfully and, holding it before her face, peered seductively over it.

"Honestly, *Tante*," she sighed. "I don't know why you make such a fuss about René. I see nothing wrong with him."

"Ah no, *chérie*," Enjolé said, coming forward to straighten the train of Juliette's gown, "there is certainly nothing wrong with him! . . . that I can see." She looked up into the mirror and into her goddaughter's rebellious face. Enjolé turned quickly away. "It is just . . . I don't know . . . there is something about him that is not quite right. He tries too hard to be charming and gallant. A man in his position should not have to try so hard, Juliette. It should be bred into him."

Juliette eyed her impatiently, but before she could comment on the unflattering appraisal, the bell rang below.

"It's René!" she exclaimed and holding the skirt of her gown up slightly, she hurried from the room and down the stairs.

Enjolé followed more slowly. She had to admit that Vicomte René du Montier looked quite handsome in his formal evening attire, though his face alone would

not have merited such a flattering description. He was nice-looking without possessing any particularly striking features. His hair and eyes were a medium brown, his features plain. He was certainly no ladykiller to look at; nevertheless, he was popular with the ladies. In a society overstocked with dandies, he stood out in refreshing contrast in the Royal Court of Louis XVI, although when the occasion demanded it, he knew how to dress as splendidly as his fellow Royalists. This evening he was attired in a highcollared velvet coat of the softest shade of violet, a purple cravat knotted skillfully at his throat. The frilled ruffles of a silk shirt peeked out elegantly at the cuffs of his coat. A sheathed rapier hung from the belt of satin knee breeches.

He bowed to Juliette, sweeping low in a grand gesture. Taking her gloved hand and drawing her close, he whispered, "You are so beautiful I may keep you all to myself this evening."

Juliette smiled lowering her thick lashes demurely. Taking the hand he offered, she allowed him to lead her to the door and out into the waiting night.

The red and white coach upholsted in white Utrecht velvet and drawn by six horses pulled into the main courtyard of the palace at Versailles, residence of the king and queen of France. Juliette gasped, overwhelmed by her first sight of what was already a legend.

Fourteen years in the making at a cost of sixty-five million pounds and 227 lives, it was a permanent exhibition of ultimate splendor. Designed as the antithesis of a feudal castle, it had the longest horizontal frontage of any building in Europe, with hundreds of high evenly-spaced windows. In contrast to earlier castles intended to be impenetrable fortresses, the Palace at Versailles was indefensible, its vulnerability only adding to its elegance. It was even open for public viewing via scheduled carriages called chamber pots which carried Parisians the sixteen kilometers to Versailles and back.

The immense courtyards were splendidly decorated

with marble statues and sculpture gardens; the zoo was stocked with lions, tigers, pelicans, ostriches. On this special evening, the glow from the palace windows could be seen for miles around and the music drifted airily across the grounds into the night beyond.

Besides the elegance of the palace, the one last stronghold of truly absurd display remaining from previous regimes was the clothing worn at court. On this occasion it was shown in its grandest, most ostentatious form. Men sauntered by wearing brocade waistcoats embroidered with elaborate scenes of hunts and battles and fastened with gold buttons bearing miniature portraits of French kings. Women wore their powdered hair styled high on their heads—some to near toppling heights of two and three feet—laced with ribbons and jewels. Most wore the mandatory beauty marks: delicate little appliqués applied to the face and given deliciously wicked names like “wenches” if worn on the nose, or “coquettes” if worn on the upper lip, or “receivers of stolen goods” if placed over a real birthmark.

Standing at attention along the wall were the king's Swiss guards in colored ruffs and plumed hats. At the king's side stood his personal guard of nobles in blue jerkins and red, silver-trimmed trousers.

Gazing into the color-dazzled room, Juliette felt René squeeze her hand. Looking up at him she saw him nod to the left—and found herself looking into the eyes of the King of France.

He was a weak-faced man whose features were lost in fat, but the blue eyes were kindly. Beneath his velvet elegance he was potbellied. He was a king who enjoyed spending his royal time working on mechanical things and his hands were always grimy. He was a virtuous king, with no mistresses slipping into his private chambers and no secret orgies to inspire the Paris pamphleteers. He was a student of world history, spoke German fluently and read Latin with ease. Nevertheless, despite his intellectual accomplishments, his me-

chanical aptitude, and his well-meaning intentions for France, he was a henpecked husband.

In the midst of the growing crowd, surrounded by a circle of admirers was the queen, her entourage hovering around her like drones in a hive. These were the favor seekers, the intimates and confidantes of the queen. They basked in her attention for as long as she was interested.

Marie Antoinette was no beauty; her face was too long, her bottom lip pendulous, and her right shoulder was lower than her left. What she did possess was an air of natural majesty. She was the most talked-about woman in the realm—her childish displays of power, her incessant meddling in affairs of state, and her excessive spending put into print by the pamphleteers and set to verse by the songwriters. She loved masked balls and playing faro. She bought diamonds on credit and surrounded herself with a coterie whose only common denominator was greed.

But she was a woman with a woman's weaknesses. One was Count Axel Ferson, a tall Swedish nobleman whose blond good looks and somber Viking manner caught her eye. His courtesy and reserved manner set him apart from the lace-handkerchiefed French courtiers. There were tears in the Queen's eyes as she bid him farewell when he set sail for America.

To fill the space he left vacant, she turned her attention to the man who was her current weakness. He too was different from the others at court, but his manner was the opposite of Ferson's. He was arrogant and treated her with an air of indifference that she hated but would not want to change in him. Ferson had accepted her gifts and favors, but this man would have none of them, refusing the offer of a French ship and a yearly pension of twenty thousand pounds. He came and went as he pleased in spite of her demand that he stay near her. Often she would not see him for weeks or months. When she reproached him for his neglect he only laughed.

Now, standing in the middle of the crowded ball-room, Marie Antoinette stifled a yawn and passed her fan over her face. Peeking over it, she scanned the room, looking for her latest passion. As if on cue, he materialized at the edge of the crowd. He looked magnificent, dressed in a black coat rimmed with silver braid, a silver brocade waistcoat, and black velvet breeches that were tucked into shiny knee-length Hessian boots. When he bent his head, his dark hair curled over his forehead, for he refused to follow the trend and hide his hair beneath a pompous wig.

She caught his eye briefly before he moved into the crowd and disappeared. A delicious shudder raced along her spine as those blue eyes met hers. Reluctantly, she turned her attention back to her fawning admirers.

On the other side of the room now, Christian Youngblood surveyed the scene glumly. The last place he wanted to be was here, hardly able to move because of the crowd, bumped and jostled and continually stared at. Curse it all, why had he ever let Ryan talk him into this? Then spotting Stephan d'Ajasson working his way toward him through the crowd, Christian breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where the hell have you been?" he growled as Stephan joined him. "I've been here half an hour already. For a minute there I thought I'd have to go over and amuse Marie Antoinette."

Stephan laughed. He knew his friend's aversion to such gatherings. "Ah, *mon ami*," he said, waving his hand to indicate the scene around him, "it is grand, is it not?" But the tone of his voice indicated that he, too, found little to admire about the French court. "I was just saying hello to the Baroness Lenard."

"Behind the shrubs?" asked Christian.

The Frenchman let out a hearty whoop. "You were spying on us!"

Christian eyed him sourly. "Remember, it's du Montier we're after here tonight, not wenches. Have you seen him yet?"

"A word of warning, *mon ami*," Stephan said, still smiling but with an edge to his voice. "You are at the Royal Court and you must respect the traditions and the rules. If you do not address him properly more than just the eyebrows will be raised." He leveled a glance at the swords at the sides of the Swiss guard. "These things are taken very seriously, Christian, so perhaps you be a good boy tonight, eh?"

Christian resented the patronizing tone, but he had to admit that Stephan was right. The Marquis, having been born to the idiosyncracies of French nobility, knew what was expected and what would be tolerated—and what would not be. Actually, thought Christian, it was not so different from what he remembered of England and its nobility. But he felt ill at ease and out of place here at Versailles. He no more belonged here than he belonged at Amherst Hall.

His thoughts were running away with him. Shaking his head impatiently, he said, "All right, I'll address him properly. But I'll not forget for a moment what he is, and if that miserable . . ."

Stephan's grip tightened suddenly on his arm and turned him toward a young man who had just entered the room.

"Is that him?"

"*Oui*. Come, it is time. But please, *mon ami*, no trouble until we can get him outside."

Stephan d' Ajasson bowed as they approached. "Ah, Monsieur le Vicomte, it is good to see you. You are well, no?"

René looked at him politely but guardedly, trying to come up with a name to match the face.

"Marquis Stephan d' Ajasson," Stephan introduced himself. "Your uncle, le Comte de Vergennes, and I have had some dealings in the past."

"Of course, Monsieur le Marquis," René replied courteously, but stiffly, with a short bow.

"Monsieur le Vicomte," Stephan said, smiling, "allow me to introduce a friend of mine." Reaching behind, he drew Christian to his side. "May I present

Capitaine Christian Youngblood? The captain is an officer in the American Navy."

Christian nodded politely, blue eyes studying the viscount whom he judged to be about his own age.

Nodding in return, René said, "Monsieurs, may I introduce Mademoiselle Juliette le Roy who has so graciously consented to accompany me this evening."

For the first time the two men, intent on their mission, became aware that their target was not alone.

Stephan's gray eyes lit up when Juliette stepped forward. "Mon Dieu," he mumbled. "Mademoiselle le Roy, I . . . you . . . I mean, how do you do?"

Her dazzling beauty paralyzed his normally loquacious tongue. He was sure he must look a complete fool to those gorgeous green eyes. A crimson blush rose to his cheeks. In an effort to hide it, he turned his head.

Christian smiled at his companion's discomfort, but when Juliette turned to face him he, too, fell silent. His eyes, however, moved over her admiringly.

Reading the look that was all too obvious, René said quickly, "Monsieurs, you will excuse us, but I see my uncle across the room and I must speak with him."

Bowing politely he took Juliette's gloved hand and led her away before she could even blush at the attention she had received from the two men. Silently, she thanked René for rescuing her from their stares, especially the American's. His look had seemed to burn right through her, and all she could do was bow her head and smile like a senseless idiot. She did not know how it was possible for a man to say so much of what he was feeling with his eyes, but the handsome young captain certainly had the unnerving ability to do so. She was relieved to be away from the impertinence of that stare.

It was warm in the room and a soft sheen of perspiration made her skin glow. Her green eyes glittered with excitement, and she caught the attention of many there besides the American captain and the French marquis. All who saw her admitted to her

beauty: some whispered cuttingly behind their fans and frilly handkerchiefs that she was much too good a catch for René du Montier who, although pleasant enough, was only mediocre.

Christian Youngblood also wondered why Mademoiselle le Roy chose to honor du Montier when she could have had her pick of the men. He, too, noticed the way her eyes danced with green lights, the way they tipped up at the corners giving her the exotic look of a gypsy. He, too, saw her perfect little mouth curl back over flashing white teeth in a flirtatious smile, and his loins tightened when she arched her slim body closer to René's.

Each time he chanced to look her way he saw her smiling or peeking alluringly over the folds of her fan at some gentleman or another. What a shameless little flirt she was! Was it just an act, or was she truly embarrassed by all the attention? Was she as innocent as she seemed, or as wild as her beauty suggested? Half-amused, half irritated, Christian Youngblood's eyes moved around the room with her, puzzling over the ravishing green-eyed vixen.

For Juliette, the evening passed in a kaleidoscope of color and breathless excitement. René kept a tight hold on her hand as he introduced her to France's most illustrious gentlemen and grandest ladies. But even René's protective presence could not shield her from the relentless pair of blue eyes that followed her from one end of the ballroom to the other until she could stand it no longer.

"René", she cooed, "do you think we could take a breath of fresh air? It is so stuffy in here, and I . . ."

But his attention was focused on a man who was threading his way through the crowd toward them.

"What is it?" she asked, seeing the frown on his face.

"Nothing, my pet," he said quickly, "just an acquaintance."

The acquaintance was a man considerably older than René and considerably fatter. His liquid stare made

Juliette quiver with revulsion. Though he spoke to René, his weak, watery eyes were on her. "Ah, René, what a pleasant surprise this is."

Juliette felt René stiffen. "Indeed," came the terse reply. With reluctance, he added, "Comte Remy, may I present Mademoiselle le Roy? Juliette, Comte Hugo Remy."

There was something decidedly unpleasant about the Count. Perhaps it was the fat, bulging body beneath the overly lavish frock coat, or the pudgy hand that closed too tightly over her fingers, or the thick, wet lips that pressed a sloppy kiss to the back of her hand.

"There is an urgent matter I wish to discuss with you," he said to René. "Would you excuse us, Mademoiselle?" Before Juliette could object, he had clamped a hand on René's shoulder and was leading him away.

With an impatient sigh, Juliette turned back to the ballroom. Suddenly she was aware of the closeness of the room and the lights that seemed to make her head spin. Flicking open her fan, she fluttered it rapidly before her flushed face, but it did little good. Perhaps some fresh air would help, she thought, and she searched out the doors leading to the balcony.

The midnight air felt cool against her fevered cheeks. Walking to the end of the balcony, she wrapped her fingers gently over the wrought iron railing and breathed in the perfumed air. Throwing her head back she gazed up at the midnight blue sky with its stunning array of stars. Why, there were almost as many stars in the sky, she thought wickedly, as there were diamonds in the ballroom!

From somewhere below, a whisper of voices caught her attention. Instead of leaving discreetly, she drew forward to listen and recognized one of the voices. It belonged to René, and he sounded angry.

"I told you," she heard him say in a terse whisper. "I cannot arrange it for this evening. You must understand, Monsieur, these things take time. It is a very delicate matter."

The other voice responded angrily, "You forget that you asked me to name a price for my silence. Now that I have done so, you claim you cannot pay it, or is it perhaps that you *will* not pay, eh, Monsieur? Maybe you want it all for yourself. There are many things you seem to want for yourself, René, and I can so easily set it crumbling all about you if you do not grant this request."

Juliette was holding her breath for René's reply when suddenly a hand closed over her mouth. Her eyes flew open and her cry was forced back down her throat. A strong muscular arm circled her waist, hauled her off to the side and deposited her beside a potted palm. Whirling around, she stared, outraged, into the dazzling blue eyes of Christian Youngblood.

"No screams and no arguments," he told her sternly. "Now stay put, Mademoiselle, and you won't get hurt."

"But—!" she began.

He flashed her a look that aborted any protest. Speechless, she watched him slip quietly to the edge of the balcony where he stood listening. She knew from the way his hands tightened on the railing that he did not like what he heard.

Raising her eyes, she studied his handsome face outlined in the moonlight. Then, involuntarily, her eyes moved to the broad shoulders beneath the velvet coat; next to his chest, taking in the way the lean muscles rippled beneath his shirt. She noted the tightness of his velvet breeches that emphasized the lines of his hard-muscled legs. But her inspection stopped abruptly and she blinked hard at the enormous bulge between his legs that was as impossible for him to hide as for her to ignore. She looked up at him quickly to find him staring at her, smiling in amusement. He shrugged, suggesting that he was powerless to control his body's demands.

Juliette's cheeks burned with embarrassment. How dare he! She whirled about and stalked off defiantly, her abrupt departure a blatant challenge that left him smiling.

Returning to the ballroom, she recognized no one. Without René at her side she was suddenly a stranger. The musicians began to play again. Glancing about anxiously, Juliette swerved to avoid a dancing couple. In the next instant, she herself was swept out on the dance floor by a pair of strong arms.

"Monsieur, please," she protested at the strength of the hold on her. She looked up again into bright blue eyes. This time they seemed to be laughing at her.

Juliette tried to squirm away, but he only held tighter. Scarcely able to breathe, she had no choice but to dance with him and suffer the hot wave of embarrassment that swept over her at the way he pressed her to him. Oh this was intolerable! This man had no shame!

Christian Youngblood looked down into her angry eyes and laughed. He had tossed a coin with Stephan to see who would go after du Montier and who would keep this beauty occupied. He would have loved nothing better than to land some good blows to that traitor's jaw but, Christ, this woman was something else! His mouth went dry just to feel her body in his arms, so slender, so supple, yet so full of resistance and fire. He whirled her around, thinking, what a shame, my beautiful *chérie*, that I cannot have you this evening. He cursed his luck at having to report back to Ryan immediately instead of being free to taste this lovely creature's wares. To Juliette he said, a measure of arrogance behind his smile, "Why do you resist so, little one? Does it not please you to know that at this moment you are envied by the Queen of France?"

She barely reached his shoulder, but looking up at him defiantly, she replied, "I care not, Monsieur Capitaine, for if she envies me for dancing with you, then certainly she has poor taste!"

"You'd better not let her hear that," he whispered against her ear. "Your pretty little head could wind up in a basket."

Did she detect a touch of contempt in his playful tone? In tightlipped silence she endured the rest of the

dance, but when the music ended, he still held her securely in his arms.

"The dance is over!" she said, wriggling away from him.

"So it is," said Christian. "Oh, by the way, . . ." His grip on her wrist spun her back to him. "Monsieur du Montier will not be able to escort you home this evening."

"What?" Juliette's eyes blazed angrily at him. "What are you talking about? René said nothing to *me* about this!" she challenged him.

"Well, I can assure you, little one, he is no longer here."

Confusion crept over her then. She stood on tiptoe hoping to catch sight of René in the crowd.

Christian Youngblood yawned, watching her. "I cannot imagine why a pretty little thing like you would associate with a traitor."

Green eyes flashed at him. "Monsieur Capitaine, your insults are . . ."

"Oh, don't take my word for it," he stopped her. "I'm sure you'll be hearing all about it in the next few days. All of Paris will."

"I do not know what sort of riddles you speak in, nor what games you play, but I find them—and you—quite unpleasant."

"Oh really? Forgive me if I've offended you, Mademoiselle," he said mockingly. "Apparently, the Viscount has not seen fit to reveal his true nature to you. Hmm, that's too bad, too bad, indeed."

"Do not trifle with me," Juliette warned, "and beware of false accusations. You are a foreigner, Monsieur Capitaine, and you can suffer harsh penalties for spreading such vicious rumors about one of France's finest men!"

Christian Youngblood's blue eyes sparkled brightly with amusement. "Du Montier? A fine man?" He laughed in a way that took her by surprise and further infuriated her.

"This conversation is at an end!" Gathering up her

skirts, she spun away from him, chin tilted up in defiance, green eyes smoldering like cut glass.

He watched her storm out of the ballroom, all grace and angry determination. He'd let her stew for a while, then he'd fetch her and tell her the truth about René du Montier that all of France would soon know. Grinning, he turned back into the room and immersed himself in the sea of brightly colored bodies.

Chapter 6

The cool midnight breeze felt so good against her burning skin. She breathed deeply, gulping air into her lungs until gradually her breathing slowed. Oh, she was furious! How dare he say such insulting things about René! How dare he! There had to be some explanation for it; there just *had* to be!

A touch on her elbow startled her. She spun around expecting to see that pirate's face with its mocking smile and blue eyes that laughed at her. Instead, she blinked hard into the leering face of Comte Hugo Remy.

"Ah, Mademoiselle le Roy, I thought I would find you out here." His voice had an odious note of false politeness.

Juliette was in no mood for pleasantries, particularly those expressed by a man she instinctively disliked.

"You will excuse me," she said, attempting to sweep past him. "It is late and I must find René."

"Oh, but my dear, he is no longer here. No indeed. I saw him leave some time ago—quite hurriedly, I might add—in the company of the Marquis d'Ajasson." Seeing the worried expression on her lovely face, he added, "Oh, but do not concern yourself, everything has been arranged."

"Arranged? Monsieur, I don't know what you are talking about. He left, you say?"

"Probably back in Paris by now. But, as I said, all has been taken care of. Come now, I think we should be going."

She stepped away lightly, avoiding his outstretched hand. "Going? Going where?"

Comte Remy sighed. "Oh, *do* come along my dear, I hate having to haggle twice over the same matter."

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about!"

"And *I* am sure you do," he said, fingers closing tightly on her arm.

Her eyes flashed at him. "Let go of me! I have had quite enough of this sort of thing this evening and I am leaving—now!"

Comte Remy's grip tightened. "I'll escort you then."

She tried to pull away, but he hung on, refusing to let her slip by. "That will not be necessary!"

"Oh, but it will," he replied, his voice suddenly hard. He leered at her. "You see, I have already paid for the privilege."

Juliette bit back the caustic reply she wanted to hurl at him. "Well, then, Monsieur," she said instead, "someone has cheated you."

The count smiled. Her resistance was beginning to intrigue him. Yes indeed, he would like very much to tame this little firebrand, and he was regretting less and less the sum he had spent to acquire her. Just look at the way those green eyes fired up at him! The sight of her struggling to extricate herself from his grasp excited him.

Instead of crying out, Juliette grew rigid, contempt evident in her voice. "Will you *please* let go of me?" It was a demand, not a plea.

"In a moment," he said, "and then only with reluctance."

Loosening his grip, he slid his pudgy white fingers slowly, purposefully down her bared arm, making her flesh crawl.

"Surely you cannot be as cold as you pretend to be? Come, I know a place where we can go to discover each other's secrets, if you know what I mean." He pulled her closer as he spoke, his breath hot and moist against her cheek. "Why do you resist so, my little beauty? Can

it be that you are too shy to give in to your passion? I can fix that, you know."

"You are insane!" Juliette exclaimed. "Let go of me this instant!"

Ignoring her demand, he reached behind her head and forced her lips to his, his tongue seeking out the corners of her mouth. Juliette remained stiff and unyielding in his embrace, enduring the repulsion of it, green eyes open wide and staring into his with hatred and outrage until, at last, he released her. He was breathing hard when he stepped back, but he flushed with anger when he saw her deliberately wipe the back of her hand across her mouth, obliterating his kiss.

"So, you persist in being difficult," he accused her. Convinced that her unresponsiveness was nothing more than a foolish act to draw him on, he was tiring of the game.

Slowly she backed away from him. "Monsieur, I do not care what bargains you have struck, or with whom. You are a poor businessman to have paid in advance for something you shall not have!"

Hugo's arm circled her waist in a vise-like grip, squeezing her to him in a painful embrace, twisting her arm behind her until she thought it would break. She fought down a wave of nausea and panic.

"We're leaving now, my little beauty, and I'll hear no more of your silly fits!"

Christian Youngblood watched from the far end of the dark terrace as the couple disappeared from sight. Damn the bitch, he swore angrily. How could she have anything to do with a man like Remy, twice her age and a repugnant brute in the bargain. He had been a fool to think anything but a stone-cold heart could live beneath such perfect flesh. She was no better than the rest. Perhaps du Montier arranged it all. But no matter, what angered him most was Mademoiselle Juliette le Roy's obvious lack of discrimination when it came to choosing her lovers. Oh, what the hell, why should he care? She must know what she was getting into.

He strolled back into the brightly lit ballroom in time to catch sight of Stephan slipping up the wide red-carpeted stairs, a pretty blonde on his arm. The Frenchman had wasted no time in handing du Montier off to the authorities before running back to pick up where he'd left off. One look at the grin on his face and Christian knew where he was headed. For some insane reason, the Marquis d' Ajasson just loved making love between the satin sheets of the Queen of France's bed, and it was the Queen's Lady in Waiting he held in his arms.

A sour look distorted Christian's handsome face. In order to cover his friend's reckless impulse, he would now have to divert the attention of the Queen.

He spotted her amidst the usual circle of clinging faithful. Catching her eye, he beckoned with a nod of his head for her to join him. He stood watching then, amused, as Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, rose, brushing everyone else aside with her indifference, to follow him out into the moonlight.

The ride back to Paris by coach was spent in relative silence, with Juliette sitting stiffly at the Comte Remy's side, eyes fixed straight ahead. Reaching over she pulled the shade and glanced out onto the darkened Paris streets. Failing to recognize the part of the city they rode through, she turned questioningly back to the count.

Comte Remy permitted his watery glance to linger deliberately on her breasts, as though possessing the power to see right through her velvet cape, her silk gown, and her lace underclothes.

He glanced at that exquisitely shaped mouth. He could almost feel her moist lips parting beneath his and his pulse quickened. He could imagine how those beautiful green eyes would close in ecstasy as her slender white thighs parted for him. Soon, he told himself, soon she would be his. He *could* take her right here in the carriage, but he would curb his appetite until they reached Madame Novelle's where he could

have her any way his heart . . . and his passions . . . desired. Running his tongue over thick, fleshy lips, he laid plans while Juliette sought frantically for a way out of the awful mess.

The carriage pulled up in front of a small brownstone on a quiet back street. Juliette found herself hurried up the steps and into a dimly lit parlor. From beyond ornate double doors she heard men's voices, loud and boisterous, and women's laughter, light and teasing, leaving little doubt as to the kind of establishment Remy had brought her to.

He left her standing by herself while he spoke to the woman who appeared from the other room. She was dressed in a garrishly seductive costume, the unmistakable trademark of her profession. Her powdered face was splotched with red rouge, not very artfully applied, and her eyes were dark with kohl. The odor of cheap perfume rose about her. Juliette stared, petrified, as the Count pressed some notes into the woman's hand. When she saw the woman gesture to the staircase leading upstairs, her heart nearly stopped in her chest. Without thinking, she whirled and fled, leaving the door wide open behind her.

She had to run! She had to get away from that horrible man!

Her heart beating frantically, sobs choking from her throat, she ran as fast as she could through the darkened, deserted streets. Catching her slipper on a broken cobblestone, twisting her ankle, she cried out in pain and fell to the ground.

Her cape tore loose from her shoulders when she tried to get up, but there was no time to think about it. Leaving it behind, she scrambled to her feet and ran, mindless of where she was going, the only sounds breaking the awful stillness of the night the echo of her footsteps through the deserted streets and the wild beating of her heart.

Chapter 7

Out in the cobblestoned lane two men walked side by side, their laughter echoing through the empty street.

"This should be a lesson to you, *mon ami*," the taller, fairhaired man said to his companion, shaking a finger at him.

The other laughed. "Look who's talking! I saw you leave the grand ballroom on the heels of Lady Montague. I'll wager if Her Majesty knew that her Lady in Waiting was entertaining a gentleman in the Queen's own bedchamber, your flaxen-haired beauty would lose her pretty head to the guillotine."

His companion shrugged his shoulders, unperturbed. "Ah, well, then it is a good thing that Her Majesty was occupied with you, is it not, *mon Capitaine*?"

Christian Youngblood glanced sideways at Stephan d' Ajasson and smiled slyly. "She's a demanding woman, that Marie Antoinette."

Stephan chuckled, "Did you see the way she looked at you when you were dancing with the little one? *Mon Dieu!* I have never seen her so furious!"

"It's no wonder," said Christian. "Marie Antoinette could never in her wildest dreams hope to match that green-eyed little temptress."

Stephan whistled softly. "Do you know, when I look at her for the first time I think my heart stop in my chest, just from the eyes alone. She is, how you say—?"

"Magnificent," Christian suggested.

Nodding enthusiastically, Stephan said, "Oh, *oui*,

but she is more than that. It is the other thing, the spirit beneath the beauty that fires a man up inside."

Christian nodded but said nothing, reluctant to admit that he had felt exactly the same when he looked at Juliette le Roy for the first time. Later, when he held her in his arms and felt her slim body pressed against his, his desire for her had taken even him by surprise.

They walked on, both men silent now, each wrapped in his own memory of the beautiful green-eyed girl they'd left behind at Versailles. It was late, well beyond the hour when respectable Parisians were out. The lamps had long since been extinguished and only the moon lit their path. The steady tap of their boot heels was the only sound in the silent street.

Rounding the corner of Rue des Junes, they had to swerve sharply to avoid a figure that darted out of the shadows.

"What the hell . . . ?" Christian swore as Stephan fell into him, pushed from behind in the rush. Instinctively, Christian reached out and seized the fleeing figure by the arm.

"Now see here!" he said angrily, pulling his catch closer to get a better look. "What's the hurry, my man? You'd better have a damned good reason for pushing my friend here, or I'll—"

The moonlight sent slivers of light across her face, illuminating her green eyes.

"Well I'll be!" Christian exclaimed.

"*Mon Dieu!*" Stephan came up beside him. "Madoiselle le Roy, what are *you* doing here? We thought you were a thief, or worse!"

Juliette was sobbing, gasping for breath, unable in her fright to utter a word. She looked from face to face, her enormous eyes pleading for mercy.

Christian Youngblood saw her fear and immediately loosened his grip. "What's the matter?" he demanded, getting a better look at her.

Her beautiful gown was soiled, the string of delicate rosettes at one shoulder torn and dangling. Her hair

had come loose and fell in reckless abandon over her shoulders in dark tangles that, combined with the wild gleam in her slanted green eyes, gave her the look of a gypsy.

"Please," she breathed, regaining her voice at last. "Please, you must help me! Oh, I beg of you, help me flee this place! I must! If he finds out that I am gone, he'll . . . he'll . . . Oh, please!" She turned pleading eyes on Christian Youngblood. "Monsieur Capitaine, please!"

He looked at her in astonishment. What on earth was she doing *here*, in the part of the city where men came alone in the night, hiding their faces, disappearing into dark hallways. He glanced over at Stephan who was obviously equally puzzled, then back at the girl. "Very well, come along then," he said.

He grasped her by the wrist and turned to leave, but they had not gone more than a few steps when a voice called out from the darkness:

"Monsieurs, where do you think you are going with that woman?"

They whirled around, Juliette cringing. It was *him*—that disgusting monster, coming after her!

"Oh please," she whispered to Christian, "please don't let him, please don't . . ."

"Shut up," he ordered harshly, tightening his fingers around her slender wrist and pulling her close to his side.

"What is the problem?" he asked, as Comte Hugo Remy ran up to them, puffing for breath.

"There will be no problem if you hand the woman over to me," the count told him.

"And if I don't?"

From the corner of his eye, the Count saw Christian's free hand touch the hilt of the sword sheathed at his side.

"The woman belongs to me," Remy said, quickly wishing to avoid a scene and eager to reclaim what was his. "I have already paid for her—handsomely, I might add. She ran out on me before I could have her. She is

mine, I tell you!" He looked anxiously from Christian to Stephan and back again.

"How much did you pay for her?" Christian asked.

"Eighty pounds."

Stephan let out an admiring whistle. "Monsieur, eighty pounds is very handsome indeed!"

But Christian's reaction was quite different. "Well, it looks as if you've been cheated. Eighty pounds is certainly too much for this little thing. Look how scrawny she is! She's nothing but skin and bones, not even enough to warm a man's feet!"

Juliette shot him a deadly look, but the pain he exerted on her wrist kept her silent.

"I'll tell you what," Christian Youngblood said, "for twenty you can have her back."

"*Twenty?* Monsieur, she is a virgin, this one. I have already paid extra for that. Surely . . ."

"A virgin you say? Ah well, that's different. Thirty then, but that's my final offer."

"This is robbery!" the Count exclaimed. "I have already paid for her; she is already mine!"

"Easy come, easy go," said Christian, mockingly. "If you want her, it's forty pounds and that's it."

"Forty? But you said . . .!"

"For your stubbornness, fifty."

Stephan averted his face to keep his smile hidden, but he also kept a hand on the pistol concealed beneath his coat, just in case the poor fool tired of the game Christian was playing with him.

By this time Juliette was trembling with fury. How dare they bargain for her as if she were a trollop. If it were not for the pain of Christian's hold on her wrist, she would have told them all what she thought of them. She bit her lip hard to keep from crying out and endured as best she could the degrading treatment.

Christian turned to leave, pulling her along, Stephan close behind. "Fifty pounds, take it or leave it," Christian said.

"This is robbery!" Comte Remy yelled after them. "I'll not do it, I tell you! You are thieves, both of you!"

He glared after them, infuriated by the insult to his dignity and his purse. In the next instant, they rounded the corner and were gone.

— "Wait!" Remy called out. "Monsieurs, wait!" Running after them, he caught up with them on Rue de Joie. "Just a moment," he said breathlessly. "All right, I will take her for fifty pounds." He eyed Juliette greedily.

Christian looked at Stephan, then studied the squirming girl at his side. "Very well," he said, handing her over to the Count. "You just bought yourself a wench for fifty pounds."

"One hundred and thirty," the Count tersely reminded him.

Christian looked bored. "That's your problem. If you ask me, she's not worth even the fifty." He slung an arm over Stephan's broad shoulder, ignoring the look of disbelief on the young Frenchman's face, and led him away.

Juliette shot a terrified look at the man who had now bought her twice and choked back a sob. "Please, Monsieur le Comte," she said, her voice shaking. "Please, you do not understand, I am not . . ."

"Never mind," he said, in no mood to listen. "You'll not get away from me again, I can assure you of that." Tossing a contemptuous glance over his shoulder, he muttered angrily under his breath, "One hundred and thirty . . . robbery!"

His grasp was painful, his touch rough as he pushed the sobbing girl along in front of him back to Madame Novelle's. "For such a price you had better perform well, my high-spirited beauty." Opening the door, he forced her through.

Juliette barely had time to react to the cruel manner in which that heartless pirate had sold her back to the Count. Torn between the terror of the moment and the bitter hatred she felt for the captain's cold indifference, she was beyond reason. Looking about wildly, she could see no means of escape, and the Count was advancing toward her, backing her up against the wall.

"Come along now," he was saying in a sickeningly sweet voice, "there is no need to pretend any longer. You have succeeded in arousing my passions, my little one, and I'll not be denied any longer." He leered at her.

Outrage and fright forced her to speak. "Stop! I . . . I have no intention of going to bed with you now or ever! Unless, of course, you wish to be branded a rapist!"

His small, round eyes protruded angrily, but instead of answering the jibe, he turned and stomped over to a crystal decanter sitting on a low table. He returned with a glass which he thrust into her hand.

"Drink it," he demanded, but when she hesitated, his manner changed. Softly, coaxingly he said, "It is only wine, my dear. It will calm your nerves. Then perhaps we can discuss this matter. If you are still adverse to this arrangement, I will escort you home."

Her green eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I do not wish to be branded a rapist, as you say," Remy purred. "How would it look? As I say, drink your wine and we'll talk it over."

Uncertain whether or not to believe him she lifted the glass haltingly to her lips and drank, gulping the wine down quickly in the hope of regaining her composure and her wits. The wine tasted unusually sweet, the taste remaining on her lips after the count took the glass from her hand.

"Come," he said, "sit down." He gestured toward a velvet divan.

She sank into the plushness of the sofa, and the soft texture of the fabric beneath her fingertips sent faint shivers through her.

For the first time, she glanced about the room he'd brought her to. Oil lamps, set to low flame, sent shadows dancing across the walls, their soft orange lights reflected in the full-length mirrors set about the room. She heard Remy's voice, but somehow it was no longer menacing as she allowed him to draw her back to her feet.

"I assure you," he was murmuring against her ear, "I have only the noblest intentions." He was drawing her close to him, pressing his flacid body tightly against hers, brushing his fleshy lips against her bare shoulder.

Colors melted before her eyes and the room began to sway. She reached out her hands to steady herself. From very far off, it seemed, she heard her own voice issuing weak protests as he held her tighter and ran his fat hands over her body.

"Monsieur . . . please . . ."

Her objections were muffled by his kisses, and despite the initial revulsion she had felt for the man, for some unknown reason she was responding to him. As if acting outside of herself, Juliette began to surrender to the Count, no longer capable, it seemed, of resisting him. She felt his stubby fingers caressing her back, her nerves standing on end at his touch. She was coming alive in spite of herself, pressing her body against his, yielding to his wet kisses. She stopped protesting. When he slid down the strap of her gown, she moaned but offered no resistance. When his hands brushed across her bared breasts, teasing and pinching her nipples erect, she gasped but was powerless to stop him.

What was happening to her? From a dark, recessed corner of her mind a small voice screamed in outrage. How could she do this? How could she submit so easily to this creature? Had she no pride? Dear God, how could this be happening to her? It was as though her body had become disconnected from her mind and now possessed a will of its own.

"I don't know what's happening," she breathed, surprised to hear her voice float into the air.

Comte Remy responded by burying his face against her breast, hungrily feasting on her nipples. Unable to prevent herself from succumbing to his liberties, she felt a strange, tingling sensation creeping across her flesh, intermingled with a wave of nausea and a flush of shame.

The room was aglow with a million sparkling lights, each shining at her as though she were standing among the stars. Colors merged into one continuous vibrant swirl -- the red of the velvet drapes into the lustrous green of the carpet and then into a great turquoise wave. From that they all melted into blue, the brightest blue she had ever seen. But wait! Something penetrated the silky curtain shrouding her mind. She had seen that blue somewhere before. Where was it? Where . . . ?

The Count was laughing, squeezing her breasts. "Ah, *ma chérie*, so it was all a game after all." Pressing his lips to her ear and running the tip of his tongue around it, he whispered breathlessly, "You are so beautiful, Juliette . . . so beautiful . . ."

She moaned, a final weak protest. Misinterpreting, he pulled her hard up against him. "Ah yes, you are ready now, are you not, my dear?" Guiding her to the bed, he placed her down on it, hands stroking her flesh. "Yes, that is right," he said, breathing hard. "Close your eyes . . . your beautiful green eyes . . ."

Were even her eyes betraying her now, a detached part of her mind wondered bitterly? Eyes . . . eyes . . . Her head fell back on the pillow and a small smile touched her lips as she finally remembered just where she had seen that amazing blue before. It was the color of his eyes—that pirate's. How could she ever forget them? One moment blue as a flawless sky, the next as deep and veiled as a murky sea.

She started to laugh, no longer aware of the Count's actions. But his voice had a different sound now. No longer thin and reedy, it was rich and deep, with a slightly mocking note to it that sent shudders of remembrance through her. She tried to open her eyes, to focus them, and gasped at what she saw. Truly she must be going mad, for Remy's face no longer looked thick and ugly to her. It was young and handsome . . . so handsome . . . and smiling at her. . . .

From a distance she heard heavy shuffling, then a

cry—a mixture of pain and surprise—then laughter. Suddenly she was being consumed by a giant tidal wave that engulfed her in watery arms, pulling her down into its dark depths.

The last thing she saw before slipping into unconsciousness were those eyes smiling down at her—so sparkling bright, so dazzling . . . so blue.

Chapter 8

Through a dense fog that clouded her brain, Juliette gradually became aware of a slow, steady rocking motion. As her mind began to clear and the fog dissipated, she had the strangest sensation of movement; yet all about her was still as she opened her eyes.

She was lying in bed, the covers drawn up over her. In the corner of the low-beamed room, a fire crackled warmly in a brazier, inviting her to open her eyes further and sit up.

Limp with exhaustion, still suffering the aftereffects of the wine Remy had given her, she could barely keep her head up and slipped back down against the soft pillow. But before she could retreat into a peaceful dream, the sound of voices from beyond the door caught her attention. Recognition sent all thoughts of sleep scattering. She sat bolt upright, straining to hear.

"How the hell should I know?" The familiar voice, harsh with impatience, sent shudders through her. She pulled the covers up tighter around her chin, ready to draw them quickly over her head. Another voice, though, light, friendly, put her strangely at ease and gave her the courage to tiptoe across the floor to press her ear against the door.

The speaker was laughing. "*Mon ami*, if you do not know what to do with her, then surely the crew might."

"And I suppose that includes you?" the first voice said, this time with a note of amusement.

"Aboard this ship," came the answer, "you are the

captain, so I guess that makes me a part of the crew, does it not, *mon Capitaine*?"

The first voice flared up angrily. "Curse you anyway. And her too! Me, I've got no time for virgins! You heard the man, she's a maid. Why the hell do you think he paid such a price for her?"

"For the same reason you would have paid that price, and not because she is just a maid. I have seen you give less of your time to other women, including the Queen of France. Yet you went through a great deal of trouble to rescue *la petite*. I am wondering whether you did not stop the Count from deflowering her because you wish to do it yourself."

Christian Youngblood responded indignantly to an accusation he would have tolerated from no other man. "Blast it Stephan, I was drunk! If I hadn't been so full of Jamaica spirits, I'd never have bothered going back for her. And it has nothing to do with her being a virgin, although don't tell me you really believed that fat old fool. I'd say the poor bastard had been taken in—another of du Montier's tricks, I suppose. I'll also wager our chaste little virgin has been bedded by more than a few men."

"Is that why she was so frightened that she trembled like a little rabbit? Is that why that fat pig had to drug her to seduce her?"

"Blast it, Stephan, how the hell should I know? Leave me be! I'm in no mood to listen to any more of this. If you believe she's a virgin and if it means that much to you, then you can have her."

The Frenchman laughed heartily. "You are very generous, but *non*. Something tells me that this one I will not touch. Something in those blue eyes of yours says I should not, or I may never see dear France again!"

The laughing voice faded and all was quiet on the other side of the door.

Juliette, assuming that both men had gone off together, turned from the door. In the next moment it swung open, and she whirled around to see Christian

Youngblood. With a cry, she ran for the bed, suddenly all too conscious of her nakedness. A scarlet flush flooded her cheeks as she knelt amidst the rumpled bed covers, trying desperately to hide from his bold gaze.

"I see you're up," he said. "I was beginning to think it would take a bucket of cold water to rouse you."

He went about the room as though he belonged there. At the desk he shuffled through a clutter of charts and papers, selected one from the others and, his back to her, stood reading by the light of the oil lamp. Speechless, Juliette watched him, observing the lean muscles straining beneath his coarse linen shirt, the ebony hair curling recklessly at the nape of his neck. She waited for what seemed an eternity for him to turn around.

When it was obvious that he was determined to ignore her, she took a deep breath and asked: "What have you done with my clothes?" She tried to keep her voice steady, but didn't quite succeed.

He turned to her then, as though she'd just reminded him of her presence. "I don't think you'd want to put those back on," he said. "That dress was torn in the most indiscreet places." A teasing grin darted across his face.

"Surely I cannot leave here in this!" she declared, clutching the blanket tighter around her, unaware that it only emphasized her slender curves.

Shrugging, he replied, "Well, I suppose you could wear a pair of my breeches, if you roll them up . . . and a shirt, perhaps. But I don't know where we'll find shoes small enough for your feet."

"That does not matter," Juliette said, "just as long as I do not have to roam the streets naked."

Christian pursed his lips and expelled a long breath of air. "I don't think you'll be roaming any streets, not for a while at least."

"What are you talking about? Just let me have some clothes and I'll be on my way, if you don't mind!"

"I do mind," he said, "and you won't be leaving."

Juliette's eyes widened. "You cannot keep me here! I

will leave immediately, with or without your clothes! I'll not remain here one minute longer!"

Christian Youngblood started toward her, causing her to shrink back to escape his outstretched hand. But instead of reaching for her as she expected, he knelt on one knee on the bed and threw open the shutter on the window directly above. "Take a look."

She turned cautiously and peered out. What she saw made her gasp. It was the sea! Miles and miles of it spread out before her startled eyes with no trace of land in sight!

She whirled on him, green eyes ablaze with fury. "You have tricked me! We are aboard a ship and you have put to sea without telling me!"

The amused look on his face soured instantly. "Without telling *you*? I am captain of this ship, I need not inform you of my actions, nor seek your approval of my orders!" He turned and stalked away.

Gathering the covers around her, Juliette slipped from the bed and trailed barefooted after him. "How dare you! You have no right to keep me here against my will! If you do not turn this ship around and sail back to France at once, you will be guilty of abducting me! That is a major offense, Monsieur, one you will pay dearly for!"

"Abducting you?" Christian's head snapped around. "You'd better make up your mind whether you wish to be rescued or not! As I recall it, I did you a favor by taking you away from your Count. Either your mind is still so foggy that you recall none of it, or it was all just an act. If you did not wish my help, why, then, did you ask for it? *Beg* for it?"

A hot wave of shame washed over her at the reminder of the Count, but at the moment it was impossible to find a word of thanks. She had no wish to be grateful to this man for anything, not after his insults, not after he had so offhandedly sold her back to Comte Remy! Why, if it had not been for his high-handed indifference and his greed, she would never have wound up in that awful room with that disgusting

lecher breathing all over her. And she would not be on some ship now, bound for God knows where, with a man who was a complete stranger dictating what she could and could not do!

"But you must!" she shouted. "You must return me to France immediately!"

He eyed her with amusement. "Must?" he said. "Look at you, you're hardly in any position to tell me what I must do."

That silenced her momentarily, and she searched her brain for another way to approach him. Tread carefully, she warned herself, you do not know what this horrible pirate . . . this libertine . . . is capable of.

She approached him slowly, the blanket trailing behind her. "Monsieur Capitaine," she began pleadingly, "you do not understand."

He shook his head. "No, Mademoiselle, it is you who do not understand. I did you a favor and these are the thanks I get. Well, no matter, the *Rebel* has business at sea and until that business is concluded, we'll not be returning to France. You can cry, you can beg or scream, but I tell you . . ."

"Beg?" Juliette stormed up to him, her eyes afire.

"I would not beg you for anything!" She spun away from him, the blanket whipping ridiculously after her.

Without warning a pair of breeches came flying through the air to land at her feet, followed quickly by a shirt. She stared down at the garments, but did not move to put them on. If she reached for them, she would lose the protection of the blanket she clutched to her so fervently.

"What are you trying to hide?" he asked mockingly. "There's nothing beneath that blanket I haven't seen already. Who do you think took those clothes off you last night?"

The pinch of tears of shame stung her eyes. With every bit of will she possessed, she forced them back. Stepping lightly over the clothes at her feet, she came forward, trying a different approach this time, one which just might appeal to such a man.

"I remember how greedy you were when performing that so-called favor," she sneered at him. "If money means that much to you, then perhaps you would be interested to know that I have a fiancé who would be willing to pay dearly for my safe return."

She was appalled at her deviousness; but desperate situations called for desperate measures. So what if she was not officially engaged, or if the mere thought of that arrangement her father had worked out sent her into a rage? So what if she had no intention of ever going through with it? Christian Youngblood certainly did not have to know that. To get off that miserable ship and back to Paris, Juliette would have told him anything.

"Yes," she continued, haughtily, "he is an extremely important and wealthy man. If you return me to Paris, I'm certain he'll pay you well for your trouble."

"I see." His voice was dry, and Juliette blushed at the cold scrutiny of his eyes. "I'll keep that in mind when we return to France. But, as I said, first I have business to take care of. Now I think you'd better put those clothes on, or I'll do it for you."

Green eyes blazed at this piece of arrogance. With careful maneuvering and a couple of close calls, she managed to slip into the shirt and breeches without letting the blanket fall. When she was dressed, she tossed the blanket aside contemptuously and stalked past him to the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"Away from you," she announced.

"In that case, since my company offends you so much, I'll be the one to leave. You'll be staying here."

Before she could protest, the door to the cabin swung open and they turned to see the big Frenchman enter. The sight of Juliette looking so small and helpless in Christian's oversized shirt and breeches brought a smile to his lips, but Christian Youngblood was not smiling.

"Blast it man, can't you ever knock?"

Stephan d'Ajasson ignored the less than cordial greeting.

"*Pardonez moi*," he said, addressing Juliette. "I see you have been taken care of, Mademoiselle. If I can be of service to you, it would be my pleasure." He bowed low in a grand sweep that brought a frown to Christian's face, and a small smile of satisfaction to Juliette's.

Deciding to take advantage of his seeming good nature, she flashed him a smile. Her voice assuming a soft purr she said, "Monsieur le Marquis, perhaps you can convince your Captain to reverse course and return to France. You seem a sensitive man, Monsieur, a man who would not wish to see a lady so indisposed. Perhaps you would speak to him on my behalf?"

A demure smile played across her delicate mouth. She was pleased at the effect she was having on him, for he appeared to thoroughly enjoy her attention.

But Christian Youngblood had heard enough. Stepping forward, he silenced her quickly. "I'll not be spoken of as if I weren't even in the room, damn it! I said we would not return to France until I am ready and my word is final! And you are a poor judge of human nature, Mademoiselle, if you think you can turn your wiles on my good friend here." Turning angrily on Stephan d'Ajasson, he said, "She insults you, my friend, and you stand there with a silly grin on your face. Can't you see she's just using you to get at me? Do not be deceived by her sweet words, Stephan."

He stomped over to a cabinet, reached inside and pulled out a bottle of port. "We already know of your poor character judgments, Mademoiselle. For the life of me, I can't imagine that you actually fancied yourself in love with that traitor, du Montier."

"Monsieur, you go too far!" Juliette blazed at him, her own anger now match for his. "Do you think I would believe what a man like you accuses René of? You are nothing but a . . . a pirate . . . a brigand! I'm certain your lack of honesty is as shameful as your arrogance!"

Christian swilled the port around in his tankard for a moment, as though considering her unfavorable assessment of him.

"That may well be," he said at length, "but at least I am not a traitor."

"You keep saying that, yet you have offered me no proof of the charge," Juliette countered. "You are mistaken if you think your word alone is sufficient."

He took a swallow of his wine before answering her. "Many of the secret communications between Benjamin Franklin and the Comte de Vergennes found their way to Lord North's desk in London through your Vicomte."

"Not true!"

"You delude yourself," he said dryly, "or perhaps you are simply too foolish to see the truth."

She wanted to slap his face, to wipe that awful arrogance right off it. It was only with great difficulty that she kept her hand at her side, tightly clenched in a small, white fist.

Stephan d'Ajasson stepped forward then.

"It is true, Mademoiselle," he said gently. "Every week he walks in *les Tuileries* and there he deposits his *communiqués* in a hole in the trunk of a tree. His uncle has long suspected a traitor but never did he imagine that it was his own nephew."

Juliette slumped down on the bed, her mind whirling. "It's incredible," she said, shaking her head. "How could René do such a thing?"

Christian laughed contemptuously. "With as much ease—and profit as when he sold you to Comte Remy."

She glared at him. "You should have left me with him. What you have put me through is worse than what awaited me at his hands."

"But Mademoiselle, it is not—" Stephan began.

"Never mind, Stephan," Christian interrupted. "You can see she'll not listen to either of us, so let her be. Come on, we'll go up on deck while our little rosebud thinks things over."

He led the way out of the cabin, careful to lock the door behind him, making her a prisoner aboard a ship bound for God only knew where!

Juliette knelt to look out the window. Dusk was

settling over the ocean. With slow but steady speed the *Rebel* sliced through the darkening sea. Juliette was beginning to feel a bit queasy. By the time the fiery sun had set, her body had broken out in an icy sweat. As the seasickness crept slowly into her, it forced all thoughts from her mind but one—staying alive, for it surely seemed that if she did not see land again soon, she would die. Like a frightened child she clung to the bed, fighting desperately to keep the nausea at bay, willing her misery away with all her might until at last she fell into an uneasy sleep.

Strangely, it was the cessation of the awful rolling motion that woke her. Afraid to open her eyes lest the dizziness return, she lay still, half in, half out of a dream. The room was dark except for the light of the stars through the open window. As she lay there, she heard the door of the cabin open and close softly, and her heart froze in her chest. He had returned. She opened her eyes just a slit and saw him standing at the desk, his back to her. The lamp he lit revealed him naked to the waist, his right hand resting casually on a bottle which he raised to his lips as she watched. Shutting her eyes tightly, she pretended to be asleep, hoping desperately that he would leave soon. After a while she opened her eyes again and gasped out loud.

He was standing beside the bed, hands on his hips, a reckless smile on his face. She bolted upright.

"What do you want?"

She knew by the sound of his laughter that he was drunk. "It's my ship, remember? I can go wherever I please."

Scrambling quickly to her knees, she said, "But surely you don't plan on spending the night here?"

"That's exactly what I had in mind," he replied, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "And please keep your protests to yourself, Juliette, I've no wish to hear them at this late hour."

Damn him, he was so impertinent! And she hated the bold way he looked at her.

"You might have removed your clothes," he said, "it

would have saved time." He reached out to grab her as she tried to slip away. "No you don't."

Sharp teeth bit painfully into his hand and he let her go quickly. "Oh, I see, some play hard to get, some don't. All right, let's see, how about a drink?"

His behavior confused her. "Yes . . . yes, a drink." She needed time to think . . . to keep him at bay.

"You might as well know, Juliette le Roy, I want you and there is nothing you can do to prevent my having what I want."

She was appalled by his candid statement and terrified that he meant it. With trembling hands she accepted the glass he thrust at her. In an attempt to banish her nervousness, she gulped down the wine.

"More," she said, holding the glass out. "I . . . I would like more." It was just a ploy to divert his attention, but by the time she'd finished her third glass the room was spinning wildly, and it was obvious that the diversion was not working.

The soft, rosy light of the lamp played subtle tricks on her eyes and the dizzying wine played games with her senses. She moved away from him in what seemed like slow motion, her body floating somewhere far, far away, defenseless and weak. When his arms went up around her, she found it impossible to pull away. When his tall, lean body pressed tightly against hers, she made no move to resist, not even when she felt his hardness throbbing between his legs against her.

She was swept up into the air and then placed down on the soft mattress. Gazing now with half-open eyes into his blue ones, she was no longer fully aware of what was happening . . . but she came to her senses with an awful jolt at the sound of the clothes being ripped from her body. Instinctively, she began to resist, opened her mouth to protest, but his mouth, hard and demanding, came down forcefully on hers. She lay writhing beneath him, gasping for breath, scarlet waves of embarrassment sweeping over her as his hands explored her body, touching her most intimate places.

He tasted of wine and tobacco, and she thought she would faint when his tongue pushed between her parted lips and searched out the corners of her mouth. Furiously trying to escape his kisses, she was unaware of her thighs being nudged apart until it was too late and his naked body pressed down heavily on hers. Fighting to be free, she squirmed and twisted, but his strength prevailed.

He was kissing her now on her breasts, using his tongue to force her pink nipples erect. She heard a soft whimpering sound and was unaware that she herself made it. She heard him curse softly beneath his breath at the trouble he was having in keeping her still. After a furious little battle, she found herself securely tied to the bedposts, each slender wrist held in place by strips of coarse rope, skillfully and deftly knotted in the manner of a true seaman.

"That should hold you, you little wildcat," she heard him say as he placed himself between her parted legs.

He was all over her now, kissing, biting, touching her in places she had never been touched before. In the next moment, she felt a burning stab of agony between her thighs, forcing her body to arch violently against his in pain and surprise. She fought furiously, but it was no use. She was helpless against his lust as he drove himself deeper into her.

She knew nothing would ever be the same again. How could it? But was this what she had waited apprehensively for, since that first moment of discovering herself a woman? Nowhere in the romantic novels she'd read had she found the slightest reference to the quick brutal love this man had forced upon her. Was this the way of all men? What of all her girlish dreams of romance? Where were the soft words, the promises of everlasting love?

Juliette shuddered. This man promised nothing of what she had always thought love would be like, yet somewhere in a detached part of her mind, she struggled to reconcile the various emotions which

engulfed her. Shame and revulsion were there, but so was something new and strange deep within her, stirred to life by the frightening reality of his caresses.

At last, when the driving, pumping movements ceased and the stabbing pain gave way to a warm, sticky sensation, she lay dazed beneath him, unable to move. Closing her eyes to block out the sight of him, she drifted into a deep sleep that took her far from the ghastly reality of what had just occurred, to a place where she did not have to think about any of it . . . where there were not despoilers like Christian Youngblood, only dashing heroes of her dreams.

Chapter 9

The door to the captain's cabin burst open and the sudden rush of air sent the flames in the brazier dancing. Looking up from the ship's log, Christian saw Stephan d'Ajasson, an angry scowl twisting his boyish features.

"So, that is the way you take your virgins! By getting them drunk first so they cannot resist you! I did not think you ever had to take your women by force, Christian!"

Slamming the log book shut, Christian rose. "Don't lecture me, Stephan!" he warned. The ache in his head and the sickness in his stomach from too much port left him in no mood for condemnation from anyone. "Besides," he added, "how was I to know she really was a virgin? I thought—" He stopped abruptly, considering a new thought, then turned to look at the Frenchman. "Wait a minute," he said, "you're upset because you wanted her yourself, isn't that right?"

Stephan turned away, unable to meet those penetrating blue eyes. So what if it was true? He would never have taken the girl while she lay half conscious, unable to resist. Yes, he would have loved nothing better than to deflower that beautiful green-eyed *fille*, but not with the brute force Christian Youngblood was capable of.

"But this one, Christian, she is so young and so innocent! You should not have done it!"

Christian slumped back in his chair, sighing. "You're right, I suppose," he admitted. "But, damn it, sometimes it's hard for a man to control himself, if you know

what I mean." Leveling a look at Stephan, he added, "and I think you do."

As usual, Stephan could not stay angry in the face of such disarming honesty. "So, what do you plan to do with her?"

Christian shrugged without answering.

"What will she do I wonder," the Frenchman debated out loud.

"Don't worry about that little demon," Christian said. "She may be as beautiful and fragile-looking as a piece of fine china, but she has the instincts of an alley cat. She can take care of herself, that little one." Then, assuming an air of indifference, he added, "Besides, she told me she's betrothed to some wealthy gentleman who would pay dearly to have her back. I suppose when she leaves the *Rebel* she'll go to him and that will be the last we see of her."

"Betrothed? *Mon ami*, what if her fiancé does not want her now that another man has had her?" Stephan said.

"Are you mad?" Christian scoffed, "What man in his right mind would not want her, no matter how many others have had her?"

With that he went to the cabinet built into the wall that housed his stock of port and rum. Still suffering from the after effects of what he'd consumed the night before, he poured one glass only, for Stephan. "Tell me, how'd you find out about last night?"

"I went to her cabin to see if she needed anything. She told me everything. She hates you, you know. She calls you a black-hearted pirate." He tried to keep his expression stern, but failed. "Do you know," he said, laughing, stretching out on Christian's bunk, an arm behind his blond head, "she said such horrible things about you that it is hard for me to think we speak of the same man. Did you really tie her down, *mon ami*, and threaten to beat her if she did not submit?" A look of pure mischief danced in his gray eyes.

Christian had the look of the devil himself when he answered. "She told you about that?"

Stephan nodded.

"Well, as I said, I was drunk. And how the hell did she remember? She was drunk too!"

"If I were you, I would not turn my back on the little one or she is likely to plunge a dagger into it. *Dieu*, but she called you such names as I have never heard from such a beautiful mouth."

Christian laughed then, an infectious sound from deep in his throat. "It's a good thing then that I won't be around long enough for that to happen. I haven't informed her, of course, but during the night we reversed course. In two days we'll be putting in at Nantes. When we do I'll be leaving the *Rebel* for repairs. The crew can have some time off, as long as they don't wind up in prison. I should be back in a couple of weeks." He paused, then added quickly, "I'm going to Cornwall."

He sat back to await Stephan's reaction. It came as he expected it would—hot and fast.

The Frenchman's features turned scarlet with astonishment. Jumping to his feet, he spilled wine on his boots in the process.

"Christian!" he exclaimed, "this time you go too far! It is madness, sheer madness! If it is discovered who you are, you will be thrown into prison. Are you so foolhardy that you would risk your freedom just to satisfy the curiosity you have about your brother's fiancée? You said it yourself, the wench he marries must be . . . how you say? . . . the horse's—"

"Never mind what I said," snapped Christian. "It's not that anyway. Why the hell should I care who Trevor marries?"

"What is it then that you would dare enter England and risk your life? You are an enemy of the crown, Christian, do not forget that. King George will not forget that you have sent so many of his ships to the bottom of the sea. They have orders to shoot you on sight!"

"I know that," Christian said, his dark brows drawn together in a worried scowl. "But my uncle did not

travel all the way to Statia to inform me of this marriage for no reason, and I'll never know his motives unless I go back to England."

Stephan paced the small cabin. "I do not like it. It is too dangerous . . . unless, of course, you wait for me to return and then I go with you."

"No, Stephan, this is nothing for you to get involved in. It's my family and I'll handle it."

"Bah, they are no family of yours!"

"All the same, I'm going. And what do you mean 'when you return'? Where are you off to? Back to the Queen's sheets with Lady Montague?"

Chuckling, Stephan replied, "*Non*, it will be some time before I see her again. When we return to France, I, too, am leaving. I have heard that with the help of Lafayette, our old friend John Paul Jones has been fitted out with a new ship, the *Bonhomme Richard*, I think is her name."

"I've heard of her. King Louis bought her for John Paul to sail under an American flag. But between us, I don't think she'll prove fast enough for John Paul to elude some of those British frigates. So, you want to sail with him, eh?"

"Only until Lafayette is ready to return to America. Then I go and fight with him."

"Ah yes," Christian said. "You want to fight beside the boy general. You two should make quite a pair--two French noblemen fighting side by side in the swamps and underbrush of the American wilderness."

"You should not jest, Christian. He is young; it is true, but he has proven himself worthy of his rank. Gilbert always had a flair for that sort of thing, and I would like to see if my young friend's military skills are as polished as they say. This spring he led his division at Barren Hill and escaped a British trap as the American Army was emerging from Valley-Forge. Now he is in France to lobby for more French aid to the colonies. When he sets sail for America, I want to be with him."

Stephan paused in his praise of General Lafayette

and looked down at his boots, back up then shyly. "I had thought you would come along."

Inhaling deeply, Christian said, "I would. I would even offer to escort him back to America aboard the *Rebel* if I could."

"And why not, *mon ami*?"

"Because there is something else I must do first," Christian said firmly.

Stephan knew it was useless to argue. He was just about to try anyway, however, when a frantic knock on the door stopped him.

"Come in!" Christian called.

First Mate Willis stuck his head in. "Begging yer pardon, Cap'n . . . convoy sighted north by northwest."

"How many?" Christian demanded.

"Ten ships."

"Hmm, small," commented Stephan, getting to his feet. "And the escort?"

"Frigate . . . forty-four guns. Flying an English flag. Looks like she'd be the *Countess of Scarborough*."

Christian Youngblood jumped to his feet. "Let's go," he said, slapping Stephan solidly on the shoulder and leading the way out.

Willis was right, it was the *Countess of Scarborough*, accompanied by a British sloop of war and ten merchantmen returning to England laden with cargo. Striding across the deck, keeping an eye on the ships on the horizon, Christian Youngblood signaled a general chase, putting all sail on the *Rebel*. Built for speed as she was, she had no trouble overtaking the convoy. By sunset the order was given to prepare for battle.

With expert maneuvering the *Rebel* efficiently separated the escort from the convoy and bore down savagely upon the enemy. Atop her flagstaff, the *Rebel* flew a British flag, a ruse to allow her to move in closer for the kill.

When the two ships were in pistol range, the captain of the British frigate, having opened his gun ports in readiness, challenged, "What ship is that?"

"The *Royal Princess*," Christian Youngblood shouted as he readied his guns.

"Where from?"

But this time, in answer, the British colors were struck and a huge American flag was hoisted high into the air, its thirteen stars and stripes flapping brazenly in the wind. With it came the order to fire a broadside. Simultaneously, all the guns on one side of the *Rebel* exploded, raining a hailstorm of shot into the British ship.

The response from the *Countess of Scarborough* was instantaneous. Two broadsides later one of the *Rebel's* eighteen-pound guns exploded, blowing a hole in the deck above.

The battle had begun!

The *Rebel* was outgunned, twenty-eight to the frigate's forty-four. Grabbing up swords and pistols, her crew swarmed on deck, ready to grapple onto the *Countess* in the hopes of boarding her and waging a hand-to-hand battle where, at least, they'd be evenly matched. The attempt failed when the British commander guessed his enemy's intentions and sought to cross the *Rebel's* bow and rake her.

Responding, Christian Youngblood ran his bow into the enemy's stern, a dangerous move that left his ship in a vulnerable position. From out of a thick cloud of smoke, a voice called out from the deck of the *Countess*.

"Has your ship struck?"

Above the roar of the guns came Christian's heated reply: "Struck she has—the stern of the *Countess of Scarborough*, but her colors? Never!"

Moving upwind, the *Rebel* slipped ahead of the *Countess* and tried to cross her bow to rake her once again. This time she was too close and the jib boom of the *Countess* caught in the shrouds of the *Rebel's* mizzenmast. The wind suddenly blew up all around them, forcing both vessels to pivot sharply so that they lay side by side, bow to stern, as though in a deadly dance. To further complicate matters, a fluke of the

Countess's starboard anchor hooked into the side of the *Rebel*, locking the two ships tightly together, the muzzles of their guns touching each other's sides.

The unique position was an unexpected advantage for the young captain of the *Rebel*, for he was sharply outgunned and knew he could win the battle only by cutting the rigging of the other ship and disabling her crew with muskets and hand grenades. The *Countess* tried desperately to extricate herself from the death-hold and bring her broadside to bear, but those of her crew who tried to cut the holding lines were picked off by the deadly fire of the *Rebel's* well-armed crew. Through blinding smoke, for the next two hours, both crews continued to pump bullets into each other while attempting to disengage their respective ships.

Below deck, Juliette cowered beneath the bed covers, paralyzed with fear at the deafening sounds of battle overhead. All around she heard men screaming and ear-splitting explosions as ships' guns hit their targets, shattering timbers. Above her, the beams creaked and shuddered. Her horror-stricken gaze followed a crack as it crooked its way across the rough surface of one of the wooden beams. Any second it would come crashing down on her! Panic clutching at her, she flung the covers aside and sprang from the bed. She had to get out of the cabin before it caved in on her, before she was crushed beneath the massive weight of all that timber.

She ran blindly, with no thought to where she was escaping, the awful black smoke stinging her eyes and making her cough. The sounds of gunfire sent stabbing pains through her ears, and the terrible trembling of the ship almost knocked her off her feet.

She ran without thinking, without seeing, and somehow found herself on deck in the midst of everything she sought to escape—bullets whizzing hotly all around her, men falling at her feet, the heat of the battle engulfing her and wrenching a scream from her throat. Flaming timbers crashed to the deck and men ran everywhere at once, shouting and cursing. Torn canvas

lashed out violently as she tried to pass, knocking her down so hard she hit her head with a force that left her dizzy.

Somewhere to her left she heard Stephan d'Ajasson calling out orders. Peering through smoke and flame, she made out his powerful muscles straining beneath a torn shirt as he helped a wounded man to his feet. To his right she glimpsed Christian Youngblood, his face black with powder and grimy with sweat, shouting orders and gesturing wildly.

A fearful sound from above snapped her head up . . . just in time to see a piece of flaming timber falling from the mast. She screamed, the sound swallowed up by the tumult of the battle that raged all around her, and shut her eyes tightly to await the crushing blow.

But, instead of oblivion, she felt herself lifted into the air by a pair of strong hands, slung over a broad shoulder and carried away. Seconds later, the burning spar came crashing down on the deck.

When Juliette realized that she was being taken back below, she began to kick and scream. No! She would not go back down there! She would not be crushed to death!

"Let go of me!" she cried. "I won't go!"

But the only response she received to her furious protests was a forceful slap on her bottom. Tightening his hold, her transporter hauled her down the companion ladder and back to the cabin. With a mighty kick he sent the door crashing open and stomping inside, tossed her onto the bed. When her eyes finally focused properly, she looked up into two blazing blue eyes.

"Are you crazy?" Christian Youngblood shouted, his face twisted with rage beneath the grime. "I don't want you to move out of this cabin, do you hear me?" She shrank back from the fury she saw unleashed.

Just then a shout pulled his attention away from her.

"Christian!" Stephan came charging into the room. "Christian, one of the cannons has broken loose! If it is not secured, it will crash through the railing! You must

come quickly—I am needed below!” His gray eyes looked past Christian to the girl sprawled on the bed, her face ashen, her green eyes large and glassy with fright. “*Pardon, ma petite,*” he said, “but the battle, it is raging, and the Captain is needed up there.” He pointed topside and grinned.

“Blast it man!” Christian roared, shoving by him, angered at the Frenchman’s impudence at a time like this.

Topside, the British frigate’s eighteen-pound guns continued to fire into the *Rebel*, in spite of the problems both ships had loading at such close quarters. During the minutes they had been below deck, neither vessel had made any gain in freeing itself. Glancing frantically through the blinding smoke and choking gun powder, Stephen raced back below deck, this time to where the guns of the *Rebel* were housed, leaving Christian on deck to shout orders to his crew and insults to the enemy aboard the *Countess of Scarborough*.

The errant gun secured again, Stephan tossed his pistol aside and dropped to his knees beside it. Working quickly, he sponged out the barrel to remove the sparks and debris left from the previous round. Down into the muzzle he ran a cartridge of powder wrapped in cloth, followed by the shot. Then he sat back on his heels to wait, a wick soaked in lye ready for the touchhold of the gun to set off the explosion that would send the *Countess* to oblivion. The *Countess’s* guns continued to pepper the *Rebel’s* decks, splintering the oaken planks. With pure recklessness, Christian Youngblood’s gunners aimed their nine-pounders directly at the *Countess’s* mizzenmast with double-headed shot. With slow and steady battering force the *Rebel’s* guns weakened the enemy’s masts while her eighteen-pounders blasted away, gouging holes in the frigate’s hull so large that she was fast filling with water and all available hands were frantically at work manning the pumps to keep her afloat.

To the commander of the *Countess of Scarborough*, it was now obvious that the battle was lost. With his ship’s

mizzenmast about to go, he tore down the insignia nailed to the staff in the traditional mode of surrender. When the guns finally fell silent and the smoke cleared enough to see, he and his surviving crew were escorted aboard the *Rebel*.

Far from behaving with the humility of a defeated commander, the British captain was livid with rage. Blue veins showed at his temples as he strode up the deck to where the *Rebel's* captain stood waiting, hands on hips.

"This is an outrage!" he stormed. He made no move to offer Christian his sword in the official gesture of surrender. Instead, he shouted, "You'll be hanged for this, you pirate!"

Christian leaped forward, drawing his dagger and brandishing it before the Englishman's startled eyes. The British captain's blood boiled at what he considered to be a heathen display. But what else could he expect from such a man whose battle tactics were so unorthodox they surely defied the international codes of war? To have posed as a ship of the Crown was despicable indeed! The Englishman opened his mouth to speak his mind, but before he could say the words that would have cost him his life, Stephan stepped forward, nudging Christian aside.

The Frenchman's handsome face was black with powder smudges, but the gray eyes sparkled brightly with the excitement of the battle and the thrill of victory.

"*Pardonez moi, Capitaine*," he said, addressing the Englishman. "This is no pirate. If he were, he would be looting your convoy at this very moment. But is he? Oh *non, non*, because he is a *capitaine* in the American Navy, and he—"

The officer laughed scornfully. "That so-called American Navy is laughable!" Then, leveling a contemptuous glance at Christian Youngblood, "I say, excuse me, *Captain*, but I see now that by calling you a pirate I was paying you a compliment!"

Stephan placed a restraining hand on Christian's

shoulder, feeling the lean muscles twitched in anger. Forcing Christian aside, the Frenchman stood between him and the British commander. This time the boyish smile was gone. Drawing himself up to his height, he towered over the enemy captain, shrinking the man not only with his size but with the hard stare of his gray eyes.

"Again you speak of pirates, Monsieur," he said. "Now you make me angry. I say this to you, if you do not pay the respect to Capitaine Youngblood that is due him by the rules of war, I will feed you to the sharks. *Comprenez?*"

The Englishman took a step back, cleared his throat and snapped to rigid attention. In the proper fashion, although still with a disapproving scowl on his face, he handed his sword to Christian Youngblood who promptly handed it back. Then the two commanders retired below for the traditional glass of wine.

The battle had taken three hours. Although badly battered, the *Rebel* miraculously remained afloat, a few sails could still be set on her foremast and what remained of her mizzenmast. The *Countess of Scarborough*, however, was so badly holed that all effort to keep her afloat was in vain.

Through the windows of Christian Youngblood's cabin, the British commander watched in tight-lipped anger as his ship disappeared beneath the waves of the Atlantic.

Chapter 10

The *Rebel's* bulwarks were built high to stop the sea from washing over the decks and to prevent members of the crew from being swept overboard in high seas. The planking reached above Juliette's head. Even when she stood on tiptoe she could not see above it.

Searching along the deck, she spotted a place where the big guns of the British frigate had ripped a splintered chunk out of the bulwark. Climbing over the debris of battle, Juliette looked out over the moonlit ocean.

The night was perfect; the breathtaking view caught at all her senses. The sea was clam now with no hint of the tumultuous waves of battle. Overhead a friendly moon smiled down, sending shimmers of pearly light skimming across the dark water. The air was crisp and clear and the sea spray felt good against her skin.

Closing her eyes to the almost magical quality of the midnight sea, Juliette relaxed, swaying in time with the gentle motion of the ship as it moved steadily through the fathomless waters. It was so peaceful and calm and beautiful, she thought, giving herself up to the sea's power. She felt so small and insignificant in the mighty palm of the ocean, yet she felt a part of it too, as though she belonged there with the nighttime breezes rustling her dark hair and the gentle spray bathing her face. Oh yes, she breathed in contentment, oh yes, it was so beautiful.

But the magical serenity soon gave way to a different

emotion. Opening her eyes she looked out across the dark waters stretching into the night. The vastness of it suddenly overwhelmed her and set her heart pounding. She peered up at the sky and the spectacle filled her with awe. Never in her life had she seen so many stars, so many millions upon millions of tiny, sparkling diamonds scattered across midnight blue. Out here on the limitless ocean, the entire world stilled to a heartbeat, she felt she could reach out and pluck a star from the sky with her fingertips.

Standing there, her body swaying with the silent movements of the ship, for the moment at least, she forgot all else. So absorbed was she that she did not hear the sound behind, did not know anyone else was near until the figure stepped out of the shadows and spoke.

"Ah, Mademoiselle, I see you, too, find the sea beautiful at night."

The spell was suddenly broken, sending her dreamy thoughts scattering. Spinning around, she saw Stephan d'Ajasson coming toward her, picking his way over fallen debris. Why did he have to come here? His presence was a rude reminder of where she was . . . worse, of *what* she was—a prisoner.

Her voice cold, unfriendly, she said, "Oh really, you find the sea beautiful at night?"

"Me? Oh *oui*, I think the sea is very nice, but it is the woods and the fields that I love best. *Non*, I was not speaking of myself, I have seen that same look on *mon Capitaine's* face when he looks out on the waters at night."

Juliette was not prepared for any comparison with that man. "I do not find the sea beautiful at any time of day," she declared. "In fact, I find all that blackness out there rather depressing. I merely came on deck for a breath of fresh air . . . there is still so much smoke below. I had thought it would be an improvement, but I see I was mistaken!"

Stephan's smile faded, puzzled and hurt by her

manner. Juliette saw his expression change and instantly regretted her rudeness. It had never occurred to her that he would take her bad mood so personally. In an effort to smooth the awkward moment and ease her own guilt, she gave him a weak smile. It was all she could manage, but for Stephan it was enough.

He moved up beside her. Standing in his shadow, she suddenly realized how big he was! He was handsome, too, in his boyish way, his blond hair and light gray eyes adding to the impish air he had. But his size confirmed that he was not a boy and under that youthful playfulness she suspected he was very much a man.

Strangely, even though she could sense the great physical strength of the man, she felt no fear of him. Perhaps it was the grace with which he moved, proof that even a reckless life at sea could never erase his aristocratic upbringing. He was, after all, a French marquis. Then again perhaps it was the sparkle of laughter in his gray eyes, or the sound of his voice, slightly comical when he spoke English, but smooth and persuasive when he spoke his native tongue.

His paradox of boy-man qualities confused her but they did not frighten her. Indeed, he was quite handsome, though not in the same way as . . . she hated herself for even thinking of the man . . . Christian Youngblood. Stephan d'Ajasson was handsome, yes he certainly was, but when he stood beside his captain it somehow went unnoticed. Christian Youngblood's looks were the kind that demanded to be noticed, the kind that drew your eyes irresistibly to them like a magnet, then caught you looking and shamed you for it. Damn the man, Juliette thought; everything about him reeks of arrogance, even his looks!

Stephan moved a bit closer, reminding her that she was not alone. As she raised her eyes to his, he spoke to her in French. "You should not be here, Juliette," he said softly, smiling at her. "I heard *mon Capitaine* tell you to remain in your cabin."

She gave him an angry look. Purposely she answered

in English, knowing that out of courtesy he would follow suit and she would have an advantage over him. Her own command of the English language was nearly perfect, thanks to the teaching of the nuns at Torremolinos.

"Being held prisoner aboard this ship is bad enough!" she reponded, "but I'll *not* be confined to my cabin!"

With a shrug, he replied, in English, "*Mon Capitaine* has no wish to keep you under the lock and key, but the men, they are . . . how you say? . . . hot from the battle. There are many things worth dying for to a man who still has the battle in the blood, such as a woman . . . a very beautiful woman."

Emerald eyes opened wide in astonishment. "Surely your captain's concern for my virtue comes a little late?"

Stephan grinned sheepishly. "You will find when you get to know him better that he is not the monster you believe."

"I've no intention of getting to know him better," Juliette retorted.

He shook his head. "Ah, but sometimes it is difficult . . . *non*, it is impossible . . . not to be drawn to Christian. This I think you will see."

Juliette tossed his prediction aside with a contemptuous flick of her head. "You are mistaken, Monsieur, if you think I could ever fall in love with a man like that!"

"Love?" Stephan said, raising an eyebrow. "It is you who speak of love, Mademoiselle, not I. For myself, I hope you do *not* fall in love with him."

"You see," she exclaimed, "he must truly be horrible if his own friend would advise against falling in love with him!"

He laughed then. "Ah, *ma petite*, you will think what you wish no matter what I tell you. But, *non*, I was thinking that if you fall in love with Christian—and most of the ladies do—then you could not fall in love with me."

Though he was smiling, she knew he was serious. Moving away from him, she lost her anger in a flush of nervous embarrassment. "Monsieur . . . I . . ."

"Please," he interrupted gently, placing a hand lightly on her arm. "Please, you must call me Stephan."

It only added to her discomfort. Drawing away, she said, "Very well then . . . Stephan . . . perhaps you are right. There is no need to make him dislike me any more than he already does, so I *will* return to my cabin."

She left him standing in the darkness, the soft moonlight faintly illuminating the smile on his lips and the gleam in his gray eyes.

Juliette wanted to believe the Frenchman was everything her heart told her he was, but she had discovered in a very short time just how treacherous and insincere men could be. She was still trying to come to terms with what she had learned about René du Montier. Was he truly the traitor these men claimed? An angry voice exploded in her mind: He betrayed *you*, didn't he? Suddenly she was reminded again of the grim truth that René had shamelessly and cruelly sold her to Comte Remy. How could she have been so misled by the man? How could she have failed to see through that charming veneer to the beast beneath? Enjolé had sensed there was something false about him and had tried to warn her, but she had been too foolish to listen. How could she have thought herself in love with a man she never really knew at all? The thought appalled her. The irony of it all was that she had a man like Captain Christian Youngblood to thank for saving her from René's treachery.

Juliette stalked about the cabin in bare feet, her outrage growing by the minute. When the cabin door was kicked open, and Christian Youngblood entered balancing a silver tray, she whirled to face him, prepared to do battle.

He spoke without looking at her as he placed the tray carefully down on the table. "I thought I told you to stay in the cabin."

He didn't seem particularly angry though, which was a disappointment. She was ready to tell him exactly what she thought of him!

Suddenly she was distracted by the delicious aroma of food. He had removed the cover from the tray and her mouth watered at the sight of mutton chops on a bed of curried rice. It smelled so good she could barely stand it, but she had no wish to share a meal with him. Steeling herself against the tempting aroma, struggling to suppress the hungry grumblings of her stomach, she went to sit on a corner of the bed.

"Suit yourself," he said and sat down to eat.

Eventually Juliette's hunger overwhelmed her stubborn pride. With as much nonchalance as she could muster and a nervous cough to hide her stomach's growling, she sat down opposite him.

Suppressing a smile as he poured some wine into her glass, he said, "You understand why I cannot let you out of the cabin. Some of the men haven't—"

"Did *he* tell you where I was?" she demanded, not looking up from her plate.

"Stephan? No, he said nothing to me. I knew where you were. There are no spies aboard this ship."

An angry glance came his way. "Were you watching us from the shadows, Monsieur Capitaine?"

Christian stiffened at the suggestion. "As I said, there are no spies aboard this ship, but it *is* my ship. I make it my business to know everything that goes on aboard her."

"Well then, what are you going to do about that English captain and his crew?"

He smiled at her curiosity. "They'll be turned over to the French authorities at Nantes. Maybe they'll be exchanged for Frenchmen languishing in English prisons. It's not them I care about, anyway, I was just sorry to see that ship go down. She was a good sailing vessel and would have brought a high price at Saint Nazaire."

Her look of surprise drew a bitter laugh from him. "Well, what did you expect? Should I have sent her sailing off into the sunset with a pat on her stern?"

There's a good chance that the next time we met, the old *Countess* would have sent the *Rebel* to the bottom of the sea. The only reason we won this round was luck, only luck."

Pushing her plate away, Juliette sat back and looked at him. "That excites you, doesn't it?"

"No, Mademoiselle, it does not excite me to send a ship to the ocean floor, if that is what you mean."

"It is not, and you know it."

"What I know at this moment is that you and I have some unfinished business to take care of." His blue eyes crinkled at the corners.

"If I remember correctly," Juliette replied stiffly, "you have already finished your business with me. There can be nothing else you desire."

Smiling, he got up. "Do you think my sole pleasure lies in deflowering virgins, Juliette? That first time was for me. I'll teach you what to do with this new knowledge you've acquired, and tonight it will be for us."

Did she imagine the huskiness in his voice? Before she could decide, he came up behind her. Placing his hands at her shoulders, he raised her from her seat and guided her to the bed.

"Please, don't . . ." she began, but he paid her no heed. Deftly he removed her clothing despite her protests. She tried to wriggle away but his arms went around her like two steel bands, pressing her naked body to his. Her face flushed crimson when he released his hold and concentrated on her breasts, first one then the other, caressing, squeezing, playing. Slowly he lowered his head, tracing a soft path with the tip of his tongue from her lips to her shoulders and then to her pink nipples, sending waves of embarrassment rushing over her.

His gentleness alarmed her. Before it had been quick and sharp, an indifferent rape to relieve his lust. But tonight he was taking his time, fingertips touching her softly everywhere, lingering, exploring, probing into her secret places while his eyes continued to drink up

the sight of her. Not a single inch of her flesh escaped his inspection and she began to quiver beneath his touch, burning with shame.

With a jolt, she realized that it was not so much the liberties he was taking that disturbed her as the strange feeling of pleasure . . . strange, forbidden pleasure that sent tremors through her. Though she protested weakly, she did not really want him to stop. She did not want him to take his hands off her. Under his gentle exploring fingers her body was coming alive as it never had before.

He moved his now naked body into the space between her legs, his movements faster now, his pulse quickening as the blood began to pump heavily through his veins. Attempting to suppress the surge of passion flooding his body but powerless to stop its onrush, he cursed beneath his breath: Damn it! I can wait no longer!

He had never had this trouble before with a woman. He had always been able to take them along with him so that their pleasure intermingled with his to become one driving force. But with this one it was different. Somehow with her slender white body pressed beneath his he felt a bewildering need to take her all at once—to overwhelm her and consume her. Why did he have such an urgent desire to possess her? Was it her delicate, exquisite beauty that drove him? Was it the pride beneath that beauty? Did he seek to weaken it with his strength? He was at a loss to understand it and, at the moment, powerless to deal with it.

Juliette felt the surging strength of his passion rising rapidly and it frightened her. Instinctively, she started to struggle against it, clawing at his back with sharp fingernails, drawing blood. Why had he become so rough, suddenly? Why did he force her thighs apart and enter her so savagely just as the first time? She tried to scream, but his mouth covered hers and forced the scream back down her throat.

His lips brushed past her ear, sending shivers down her spine. "No," he breathed, "don't stop me now

... don't stop me Juliette ... let me do this ... please ..."

His desperate whisper startled her. She fought him, but it was no use. Ignoring her wild struggles, he buried his face in the dark depths of her tangled hair and took her in his cruel and shameful fashion, without a thought to her feelings.

She lay beneath him sobbing, her heart beating wildly, her moment of fulfillment cut short by a selfish brute of a man whose indifference made her feel unbearably ashamed for having wanted to give in to him. How could she have imagined him capable of tenderness? How could she actually have wanted to feel his male hardness throbbing within her? The thought of it sent waves of shame flooding over her.

When he was through, he rolled off of her, pulled her close to him and fell asleep. But Juliette lay awake, oblivious to the tired ache of her bruised body, refusing to close her eyes while he was near. It was not until dawn's light began to creep into the cabin that her eyes finally closed in spite of her stubborn struggle to stay awake.

In the morning he took her again while she was still half-asleep. Again it was quick and savage, this time without even a kiss or a gentle touch. When it was over, he dressed quickly, pulled the covers up over her and left the cabin. She was not to see him again for the rest of the voyage.

That day and the next passed. Her meals were brought to her by an old sailor who would answer none of her questions. Dutifully he locked the cabin door on his way out, complying with his captain's orders. There Juliette stayed, passing the monotonous hours by alternately sleeping and pacing the small cramped quarters. She longed to be free of the accursed place ... free of this ship that never stopped moving ... free, especially, of that horrible man whose presence was everywhere even though he was nowhere to be seen. She had had enough of men interfering with

her life—men like her father and men like Captain Christian Youngblood.

Life in general and men in particular were forcing Juliette to some harsh conclusions. By the time the *Rebel* docked at Nantes, she had firmly resolved that, upon returning to Paris, she would leave at once for England. Since it was impossible to return to the convent, she decided that her only hope and possible salvation was to go to England and marry the man her father had chosen for her.

The next morning the *Rebel* sailed into the harbor at Nantes. When the old sailor came, he glanced at the bed and saw her seemingly still asleep beneath the rumpled covers. Quietly he placed the silver tray on the table, unaware as he arranged the utensils that he was being watched from behind the door. Anticipating his arrival, Juliette had plumped the pillows beneath the blanket and waited, hidden, until he would come and unlock the cabin. Now, as he stood with his back turned, she quietly slipped out the door.

She moved quickly and reached the deck without seeing, or being seen, by any of the crew. Glancing up and down the deck, she moved cautiously over to the gaping cannon-hole in the bulwark where Stephan had found her that moonlit night. Taking a deep breath and saying a quick prayer, she dove into the icy water, leaving the *Rebel* in the early morning hours as quietly and quickly as a mouse running for its life from the jaws of a lion. In the belt of her breeches she had tucked the leather pouch she had taken from Christian Youngblood's desk, the one that jingled loudly with gold sovereigns. It twinged her conscience that she had to resort to such common thievery, but cold common-sense told her that she would not get very far dressed in a man's oversized shirt and breeches, soaking wet and on foot. She would have to get a proper dress to wear for travel by coach all the way back to Paris, and shoes! She simply could not arrive in Paris barefoot!

Chapter 11

"Mother of God preserve me!"

Martha Ruddy's eyes bulged with shock when she saw him seated at the kitchen table, a half-eaten mutton chop in his hand and a sheepish grin on his handsome face. Dumping the armful of linens she was carrying on an oak table, she approached him warily, unable to believe her eyes. It couldn't be the gin to blame, not today. She hadn't touched a drop!

"Can it be?" she muttered. "Can it truly be?"

One teasing smile, one glance from those startling blue eyes confirmed what her heart desperately hoped was true. Putting the chop down, Christian Youngblood rose to greet her.

"Hello, Martha."

Her mouth dropped open. "Christian? Dear God, Christian, is it really you?"

He laughed and the sound of his laughter was just as she remembered of the boy so long ago.

But this was no boy, no indeed! A man stood before her in place of the lad she had bid farewell to years before. In a rush of pure emotion, her arms flew open to receive him, the recognition complete.

"Saint's preserve us!" she cried as she wrapped him up in her arms and pulled him close to her enormous bosom. "Lord how I've prayed for this day!"

Christian smiled down at her teasingly. "You haven't changed a bit, Martha. You're still as beautiful as ever."

"Oh, stop that nonsense!" Blushing, she sat down in the chair he pulled out for her.

"And just as spunky," he said, laughing. "I always said if there was ever one to handle Trevor and Uncle Freddy it had to be you. Tell me, how have they been treating you all these years?"

Martha Ruddy rolled her eyes and waved the past away. "Ah, those two could never get to a tough old biddy like me, you know that. They're not here, you know. Trevor's in London, as usual, and Lord Alfred had business in Truro. Did they know you were coming? Lud, what am I saying? Do they even know you're alive?"

Christian looked down at the floor. "No, they don't know I'm here." He was careful to avoid answering her other question, deciding that, for her sake, the less the old woman knew the better.

"Tell me," he said quickly, "are any of the other servants still here that I remember? Let's see, there was that pretty parlor wench, Valeria. Of course, she was too old for me then, but now's a different story." He winked at her. "Old Bartholomew, is he here . . . ? And how about Barnaby Elder?"

"No, lad," Martha said, shaking her head sadly. "Bartholomew passed on some years back, and the others took posts elsewhere when your father—" She stopped abruptly and glanced at him uncertainly.

"It's all right," he said, "I know all about my father's death."

Martha heaved a sigh of relief and nodded. "It's just me and old Seth the groom . . . remember him? . . . left from those days. He's gone to Truro with your uncle. Lud, if we haven't been busy around here, what with the wedding coming up and all, but I don't s'pose you'd know about that."

He frowned. "I know about my brother's plans to marry some French chit, that's all. When is the wedding to take place?"

"The betrothal will be officially announced in a

fortnight at a dinner party His Grace is planning. His Grace wants to . . . Oh!" A puzzled look swept over her wrinkled features. "Well, now, he's not His Grace if you're . . . well, I mean . . ."

He shook his head at her. "Don't fret, Martha, my love, Trevor is still the Duke of Amherst. I've not returned to claim the title."

Martha's face came alive with indignation. "Well you should! Lord knows, if anyone is fit for it, it'd be you!"

He gave her an impatient look. "No, Martha, I'll not fight for something I've never wanted." His answer had a warning note to it so she dropped the subject. She remembered his nature well enough to know it wasn't wise to provoke him.

"You've come just in time," she observed. "The young lady is here now, arrived just yesterday. All alone and trembling like a frightened deer. I sent her right upstairs to bed." Leaning toward him, she lowered her voice to a whisper. "If you ask me, the poor thing would rather be back in France than waiting to marry a man she has never even seen. The whole thing was arranged, you know."

Raising an eyebrow, he asked, "Oh? And how do you know that?"

Martha smiled slyly. "I've got ways of finding things out. But I'll tell you this, your uncle had a hand in it. If I know your brother at all, then I know he wasn't about to get himself married, not to an Englishwoman, not to a Frenchwoman, not to any woman. It just don't suit his purpose, if you know what I mean."

Christian considered his brother as he remembered him, the weak nature he had always found so distasteful, and nodded thoughtfully. "I think I do," he said.

Taking her by the hand he drew her to her feet. "Do me a favor, will you, Martha?"

Her eyes lit up adoringly. "Anything," she said.

"For now, don't tell anyone in the house who I am. Just say I'm a guest who's come early for the party. I don't want word to spread ahead to London or Truro

that I've come back. I have to work some things out before I confront . . . I mean . . . before I see my brother and uncle."

She clung to his hand tightly, studying him anxiously. "Christian, be careful. There's things in this house that ain't right. It's nothing I can put my finger on, but sometimes it chills me down to my bones."

Leaning over, he planted a warm kiss on her sagging cheek. "Don't worry love, nothing will happen to me, but I'll be careful anyway."

Martha looked into those radiantly blue eyes and felt a tremor of fear pass in her heart.

He squeezed her hand reassuringly and said, "I think I'll go for a ride. If I remember correctly, the sea air out by Land's End is perfect for chasing the weariness from the bones. I'll see you later. . . ."

She stood at the door watching him until he disappeared into the stables, wondering for a moment if she had seen him at all, or if she had seen a ghost come to haunt Amherst Hall.

He rode with abandon, legs wrapped securely around the girth of the black gelding he had taken from the stable, guiding him through the trees and over the hills with just a slight tensing of his leg muscles. With a strange mixture of pain and exhilaration he rode over the same hills he'd ridden so many times as a boy, fleeing the tight confines a strict father placed on him. Back then, he would urge his horse faster and faster away from Amherst Hall, and always his flight would end at Land's End . . . at the sea. There he would stand for hours, his feet planted slightly apart, head thrown back. Below him lay the ocean, limitless, boundless in its promise of freedom. It was where he always wished to be as a boy; it was where, inevitably, he would end up as a man.

It was where he rode this morning, his mind filled with a dozen painful thoughts. Dismounting, he strode along the edge of the land mass, blue eyes focused on

the sea. It still never failed to excite him, never failed to stir his senses and set his heart pounding.

He watched it now . . . one foot in the present, one in the past, part of him pulling him away from Amherst, part pushing him back toward the undeniable fact of his birth. So much of him still lay in the green English hills; so much of him was in the sea that crashed against the rocks below. He shook his head. So little of that distant past meant anything to the man he had become.

He turned away, suddenly impatient with himself. He should flee this place. He should mount up and ride away from Amherst Hall and never return. He was a fool to have come back. He cursed himself bitterly for the weakness his uncle had recognized in him . . . the arrogance that had prompted him to come. Placing one foot in the stirrup, he swung himself easily into the saddle. A quick jab from his bootheels and the gelding was off, leaving Land's End behind.

Suddenly Christian made up his mind. He would stop at Amherst only long enough to say goodbye to Martha. When Trevor and Lord Alfred returned, he would be long gone without leaving a clue that he'd been there at all. It was best, he told himself, that he cut the past out of his life.

He took the long way back, skirting the main road and circling wide through the green forests. Everywhere he saw signs of change, of time moving inexorably forward. Yet, there was familiarity too, things remembered with fondness: the path he'd used as a short cut through the woods; the massive oak he had climbed to observe the surrounding countryside, the ancient ruins of an earlier civilization that had fascinated him as a boy.

He reined his horse sharply at the edge of a glen and sat leaning back in the saddle, a smile on his face. In the middle of the clearing stood an elegant white Arabian stallion, waiting patiently while its rider, a woman, examined its right foreleg. Christian urged his mount

forward with his heels, prepared to offer his assistance to the lady who crouched down, the skirts of her dark green riding habit spread over the ground.

"You'd better check the other hooves," he said. "This country is deceiving, it looks as soft as a blanket of goose-down, but underneath there are enough rocks and pebbles to turn the best animal lame."

The figure jerked upright, spinning around at the sound of his voice. One look at the lady's face brought Christian out of his saddle. In two strides he was at her side and grasping her tightly by the arm.

"*You!*" he exclaimed.

Emerald eyes flashed at him in instant anger. "Let go of me!" she protested, pulling away.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I am just as surprised to see you," she said, tilting her chin up at him. "I was out for a morning ride when my horse picked up a stone. If you will excuse me now, I must be going." She turned away from him.

He spun her back around before she could mount. "Hold it! You can leave after you've answered my questions!"

"Questions?" She glared at him. "I don't have to answer any questions, or am I on trial for something?"

The challenge infuriated him. Letting her go, he said, "Nobody's on trial for anything, but I'd like to know what you're doing here." The look in his eyes warned her not to play games with him. His voice was harsh with anger.

"First you appear at the Royal Palace at Versailles on the arm of a traitorous Frenchman, then you nearly run me down in the dark fleeing a very sticky situation. After I free you from that, for God knows what reason, you thank me by running off with my money! Now you turn up here, claiming to be someone you are not!"

Juliette gaped at him. "I do not claim to be anyone other than who I am!"

"Don't you think I know you're the wench my . . . the Duke is going to marry? I can put two and

two together, you know. That is a Kenmare stallion you're riding. What sort of game are you playing now?"

"You're insane!" Juliette told him. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

He responded with a renewed burst of anger. "Do you take me for a fool? The Duke plans to marry a Mademoiselle Delacroix, you call yourself Mademoiselle le Roy. How do you explain that?"

Green eyes, narrowed in fury, shot him a deadly look. Taking a deep breath to control her anger, she answered him.

"Madame le Roy is my Godmother," she said stiffly. "She was the best friend of my mother who died when I was very young. When the Chevalier le Roy died some years ago, Madame le Roy traveled all the way to Spain to take me out of the convent where my father had placed me. She took me into her home and treated me as her own daughter, so it is with gratitude and deep affection that I use her good name." She warned him with a look not to dare interrupt. "I use the name le Roy, but my real name is Delacroix . . . Juliette Delacroix."

Christian Youngblood swallowed hard at the revelation. "You?"

"Yes, Monsieur, although I cannot see that it is any concern of yours . . . you . . . you pirate! You have not told me what *you* are doing here. I know not what your associations are with the Kenmare family, but I assure you, *Mon Capitaine*, when I become the Duchess of Amherst, you'll not set foot on this land again!" Her green eyes locked with his for a furious moment before he pulled his away.

"I am an acquaintance of the Duke's," he said. "I came for the wedding. I'm surprised you're going through with it, though. From what I heard, you were rather reluctant to marry him. You seem awfully eager to claim that title now. What changed your mind?"

Bristling at his mocking tone, Juliette replied, "Whoever told you that was mistaken. Now, if you will

excuse me, it is getting late and I must return. I have a fitting this afternoon with Monsieur Hamilton Wycliffe who is traveling all the way from London with my wedding gown."

She sprang into the saddle lightly, her voluminous skirts draping over the white stallion's back like a mantle. With a final look of haughty disdain at Christian, she kicked her heels into her animal's flanks and sped away at a gallop.

Christian watched her disappear into the forest. With her went all thought of leaving Amherst. Just minutes ago he could have turned his back on it and left it buried in the past. But now . . .

Now there was no turning back.

Chapter 12

Christian Youngblood was awakened the next morning by a rolling clap of thunder that seemed to shake the walls of Amherst Hall. Stretching elaborately, he walked naked to the window and peered out at a blackened sky and a courtyard barely visible through a heavy downpour. The dismal sight threw him into a foul mood, and he was muttering under his breath as he dressed quickly and left the room.

Cursing the English weather, he made his way down the wide carpeted corridor. He spied the parlor maid, Lucy Pendington, emerging from one of the rooms, white linens draped over her arm, and beckoned to her.

"Would you let me know when Mademoiselle le . . . I mean, Mademoiselle Delacroix comes down?" The blank look he received did nothing for his bad humor. "Blast it woman, have you gone deaf and dumb?"

Lucy Pendington felt strangely uncomfortable under his gaze. Looking down at the floor, she said faintly, "The lady went out, Sir."

"Out? In this weather? Where did she go?"

Lucy shrugged. "Don't know, Sir . . . she just rode off early."

Turning on his heels, Christian stomped back to his room. He reappeared seconds later pulling on his coat. Swearing out loud, he stomped out of the house and over to the stable. Damn that woman, he thought, as he plunked the saddle down on the back of the black gelding. A quick look around the stable had revealed

that the white Arabian's stall was empty. That little fool! Anything could happen to her in this storm, riding an animal as skittish as that young stallion was. Swinging into the saddle, he dug his heels into the gelding and took off after her.

He had been out for over an hour with no sign of her, unable to pick up her trail in the thick forest undergrowth. He gritted his teeth with rage at the thought that she was probably back at Amherst Hall by now, sitting beside a warm fire while he was out in the driving rain, half-drowned, soaked clear through to the bone. If he had any sense, he'd turn back and let the ninny fend for herself. But he'd come this far already, he might as well go a little farther before he gave up the search.

The rain slashed down, but he was by now past any further discomfort. Through the watery curtain, he spotted a clearing up ahead, in the center of which appeared to be some sort of dwelling. With a sharp jerk on the reins, he steered his horse toward it, but pulled up sharply when he spotted the white stallion tethered outside, pawing the ground nervously, white head tossing each time lightning ripped through the sky. So, the little fool had had enough sense to find shelter and wait out the storm.

He secured the gelding's reins to a rusted iron anvil sitting on the ground. A quick glance around told him that the shack was a smithy's shed, although from the look of it, it hadn't been used in some time. As he stepped toward the entrance, he wondered what the girl's reaction would be when she saw him.

Juliette sat hunched against a crumbling stone wall, knees pulled up to her chest, teeth chattering partly from the chill of being drenched to her skin, partly from the fear that thunder and lightning evoked in her. Her long dark hair had come loose and hung in wet straggles down her back. Her new kid boots were ruined and her linen riding habit was already shrinking. Oh *why* did she have to go riding today? It was all his fault! She couldn't stand the thought of being shut up in

Amherst Hall with *that man*. Last night she had stayed in her room, pleading a headache, to avoid seeing him.

A clap of thunder shook the crumbling walls of the smithy's shed, and Juliette clasped her hands over her ears. Lightning danced all around and she closed her eyes tightly to shut out the fury of the storm. When she opened them again, a figure stood silhouetted in the doorway. Juliette screamed and crouched back in terror.

"You should know better than to go out alone when a storm is threatening," said a familiar mocking voice.

Juliette sprang to her feet, still trembling with fear. "What are *you* doing here? Have you been following me?"

He ignored her and began to remove his wet coat, peeling it from his body. Tossing the coat on a pile of hay, he stood—hands on hips, feet apart, head cocked to one side—smiling at her.

Juliette was unaware of the sight she presented—her wet riding habit clinging suggestively to her body, the thin fabric adhering to every curve, her breasts rising and falling with her rapid breathing, her green eyes bright and her trembling lips parted provocatively. But if she was mindless of her own appearance, she was suddenly and painfully aware of his. As she eyed him warily, she was again stirred by his dramatic good looks.

She saw a lean frame carrying hard muscles and a face that was permanently browned from countless days in the sun. She saw broad shoulders and slim hips, and the way the fabric of his breeches stretched taut over his sinewy legs. She saw a perfectly shaped mouth and a thin, straight nose and dazzling blue eyes that were focused uncomfortably on her. And she saw the blatant bulge between his legs which he made no attempt to hide. That, and the desire written so plainly in his eyes made Juliette cringe, her cheeks paling rapidly.

But he did not approach her. Instead, he took a

quick look around the shed, assessing its possibilities. "I might as well see if I can get a fire going." He gave her a long, lazy look and smiled. "It could be a while before the rain lets up . . . hours maybe."

Juliette remained rigid, trapped, watching in silence as he knelt to clear the ground for a fire.

"Please," she said finally, "please, you must go."

Christian looked over at her in surprise. "In this storm? I'm already soaked to the bone."

"Well . . . well . . . then don't come near me. If you do, I'll scream."

"In the first place," he said, talking as he worked, "you can scream all you want—there's nobody around for miles to hear you. Secondly, I've no wish to rape you, although I realize it doesn't quite look that way." He shifted uncomfortably to adjust the bulge in his breeches that refused to go away.

Blushing furiously, Juliette backed away. She had no intention of being tricked by him again. The fire he made crackled invitingly, but she sat shivering off to one side, teeth chattering, as far away from him as she could get.

"The fire will take the chill out of you," he said, seating himself crosslegged in front of it. Still she did not move.

Suddenly he lost patience. "Damn it, what the hell do you think I am, some kind of monster? Do you think I have any wish to take you against your will and feel those Godawful nails in my back again? You may look like a lady on the outside, but beneath all that finery and lace you're a regular she-cat."

Juliette opened her mouth to remind him that he had *already* taken her against her will when a flash of lightning lit up the smithy through the hole in the roof, blinding her with its intensity. In the next instant, a fearful explosion shook the blacksmith's shed. Juliette began to scream hysterically as the rolling sounds of thunder and the crackle of lightning began to sound like a raging sea battle.

Quickly, Christian was on his feet and over to her, shaking her by the shoulders. "Damn it!" he shouted. "What's the matter with you? It's only a storm!"

Tears gushed from her eyes and she began to choke with breathless sobs. She looked so helpless, so utterly defenseless. Pulling her closer, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, holding her while her slender body heaved with sobs and trembled with fear. His impatience gradually gave way to a tenderness he did not quite understand. He began to gently stroke her tangled hair, crooning softly in her ear to calm her.

"Hush," he whispered, "you're safe now, little one. There's nothing to fear."

He held her like that until he felt her body begin to relax beneath his touch, until instead of resisting, she leaned pliantly against him, making no protest when he caressed her face, not even when she heard his breath quicken. He bent her backward, pressing the length of his body against hers, but Juliette did not object, not even when he guided her to the ground and she found herself beneath him on a bed of hay.

This time she was unafraid. This time he did not seem to have the same desperate urge to possess her at once. He was moving gently now, easily, guiding her seeking hands to the right places on his body while his played softly over her. She did not know how it happened, but their clothes had been cast aside and she could feel the heat all around her—the warmth of the fire by their sides, the strange animal warmth of the man lying naked beside her, the warmth that surged through her own body. She felt herself burning up inside and out, making her dizzy with passion.

He spoke softly, coaxingly, reassuring her with tenderness as though she were a timid wild creature to be tamed. And Juliette forgot everything except the moment, including who he was and what he had already done to her. She could think only of what he was doing to her now, how her own body was responding shamelessly to his touch. Placing no restraints on her passion, she yielded, letting him have his way.

Her body arched and strained upwards when his hands moved between her white thighs and his fingers stroked the soft inner flesh with taunting motions. Mindless of all else, Juliette's arms went around his neck, her breath coming in soft gasps as his fingers worked their special magic. And as the will of her passion grew bolder, so did she.

She slid her hands along his shoulders, feeling the muscles rippling beneath her fingertips, then across his chest and lower, past his taut stomach to the place that had filled her with such fear up until this moment. Hesitantly, she sought out the proof of his masculinity, brushing it lightly with her fingers, hearing him catch his breath at her touch.

It was perhaps the realization that she had the power to do this to him—to stop the breath in his chest, quicken the flow of blood through his veins, make him powerless with just one soft stroke of her fingers—that gave her the courage to go on. Timidly at first, then with movements that were bolder, she reached out and held his manhood in her hand.

"Oh God, Juliette . . ." he groaned. Then, with firm but gentle pressure, he placed his strong hand atop her inexperienced one and taught her the smooth, steady motions that would ignite the fires of his passion.

Her curious fingers drove him wild and he kissed her again, almost brutally this time. Juliette, with the new knowledge that her touch had the power to excite him to such a degree, grew even bolder, seeking to learn all about that strange and frightening part of his body that swelled inside her and now grew hard and impatient in her hand, making him stiffen and catch his breath.

When he felt he could endure no more of her maddening caresses, he moaned and pulled her hand away. He nudged her onto her back, fingers moving lightly over the skin of her belly and thighs. He brought his head down and with his tongue traced patterns on her body, making it quiver. She allowed him to part her legs, his fingers caressing her, driving her out of her mind.

Her body writhed and strained upwards, her arms reaching up for his neck and pulling him down. Through the veil of desire shrouding her senses, she was dimly aware of the blueness of his eyes, the texture of his lips and the sizzling warmth of his body as his arms now held her tightly against him.

His body was molded against hers, its masculine hardness demanding, and she was suddenly filled with eagerness for it. Barely able to breathe, she waited in anticipation of what would happen next.

His knees were between her thighs, holding them apart. As he brought his body down on hers, he whispered, "Are you ready now?"

Opening her eyes, she looked into his and the hunger in them made her passion seem boundless. In a voice husky with desire, she breathed, "Yes . . . oh yes . . ."

He was gentle at first and oh so slow, lulling her into a dreamy security with his easy, steady thrusts. The rhythm of his breathing and his long smooth motions into her increased until she was no longer able to tell where his passion ended and her own began. By instinct, Juliette matched her movements with his until they gradually combined in one driving force and built to a crescendo of desire. They were inseparable now, were one writhing, pulsating thing of passion soaring to infinite heights that left them both dizzy. . . .

By slow degrees, Juliette came back to reality, and her breathing lost its ragged edge and returned to normal. When he finally rolled off of her and pulled her into his embrace, she lay drowsily in his arms, listening to the rain, only vaguely aware that the storm had abated. She turned lazily to look at him. He was awake, blue eyes staring at the thatched roof, smiling in obvious satisfaction. The sight of that smug smile brought Juliette quickly to her senses.

Bolting upright, suddenly filled with the realization of what had happened, she pushed away from him and buried her face in her hands.

"I'm so ashamed," she said in a shocked whisper.

Christian sat up beside her and placed an arm around

her shoulders. "Why? For wanting it as much as I did?"

But her only response was to reach for her clothes and scramble to her feet.

The question remained unanswered while they dressed, and even after he had ground out the fire with the heel of his boot and they had left the smithy's shed together. Juliette could not bring herself to think the words much less say them. She was too ashamed to admit it, though the answer showed in her flushed face.

Yes, it was because she had wanted it as much as he had. Because she had wanted him as much as he had wanted her!

They rode back to Amherst Hall in silence. Leaving the horses at the stable they walked to the big stone mansion still without exchanging a word. Halfway up the steps to the main entrance, he turned abruptly and pulled her close to him.

"Christian—!" she protested, but his mouth quickly covered hers, driving any words away.

He kissed her deeply, taking her breath away. When he released her, he stepped back, a playful smile on his face.

"You mustn't do that!" she exclaimed, blushing.

"Why not?" He laughed. "I did more than that in the shed, remember?" He winked and that made her blush even more.

"The servants," she said, "they'll see!"

He placed a finger under her chin and planted a kiss on her cheek. "There's only old Martha to see, and I don't think she'd mind."

Proceeding up the steps, Juliette glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "Tell me," she said as he held the door open for her, "how is it you know all the servants at Amherst by name? Have you been here so often?"

Was she mistaken or did she feel him withdraw slightly?

"I was here once; a long time ago," he answered at last.

She had no reason not to believe him, yet suddenly she sensed a change in him. Was there a new tension in his body, a cautious note in his voice . . . or was her mind playing tricks on her . . . ?

Lord Alfred Clairborne held the brocade drape aside with a bejeweled hand. 'So, he has come,' he thought, watching them, 'just as I knew he would.' A smile of satisfaction curled his thin white lips as he envisioned the impact to come, the devastation that would be inevitable when the two brothers met on the collision course Lord Alfred had so carefully and cleverly plotted.

'Yes,' he thought smugly, 'Yes, everything is working out splendidly, just splendidly.'

A nervous cough made him turn. He frowned to see Martha Ruddy entering with a tray of hot tea and biscuits. He glanced at the old housekeeper briefly, barely acknowledging her presence.

"That won't be necessary after all," he said. "I'm leaving for London shortly. Have the driver bring the carriage around."

"But your Lordship," Martha protested, "you've only just arrived."

"What I do is no concern of yours," he told her coldly. "Now kindly remove that tray and fetch the driver."

She turned to leave but his voice stopped her. "Wait just a moment."

He studied her narrowly for a moment. "Why did you not send word to me in Truro, or to my nephew in London, that *he* was here?" He jerked his head toward the window.

Martha approached him boldly. She had never liked Lord Alfred, but she had never feared him. "He asked me not to," she replied matter-of-factly.

"He asked you not to?" he echoed incredulously. "And whose housekeeper are you, may I ask?"

Unperturbed by his anger, she replied, "Why, the Duke of Amherst's, to be sure, your Lordship."

"And you did not think it was in His Grace's best interests to inform him of this?"

"Begging your pardon," said Martha, "but I did indeed have his best interests in mind."

He eyed her with contempt. "How was that, pray tell? By keeping his long-lost brother's arrival a secret from His Grace?" Clairborne knew there was no need to pretend with her—she knew perfectly well who the blue-eyed visitor was. He only hoped she would not dare insult him by pretending ignorance.

Not only did she spare him any insult, but she surprised him with her reply: "Not at all," she said, "by keeping *His Grace's* arrival a secret from his brother."

Lord Alfred was becoming visibly perturbed. "You speak in riddles, Mrs. Ruddy!" Blast the old hag! He had never liked her and she was doing precious little now to endear herself to him. "Just whom do you owe your loyalty to?"

Martha Ruddy considered the question a moment before answering. "To the master of Amherst, Sir."

He exploded then, his fury turning his cheeks scarlet. "Then why did you not tell us!"

Martha was undaunted. "Because I was asked not to . . . and it was the Duke of Amherst himself who asked me."

There was little doubt as to her meaning then. Before Lord Alfred could say any more, she turned and left the room. To hell with the old bugger, she was thinking. Ain't nothing he can do to me. She caught a last glimpse of him as she closed the door after her. The expression of pure hatred on his face made Martha quake in spite of herself.

Chapter 13

From his father, Trevor Kenmare, the Duke of Amherst to all who knew no better, had inherited the startling good looks that naturally attracted the ladies although until now he had seemed to lack any particular desire to take one of them for his bride.

It was not so much the young lady herself that sparked his interest, but the booty he would gain by merely making her his wife. He had been so elated the day his uncle, Lord Alfred Clairborne, Viscount of Kingsbury, had proposed the match, that a rare smile had lighted his darkly handsome face.

"The Black Star Line!" he had exclaimed. "By George, Uncle Freddy, this time you have outdone yourself!" He had looked admiringly at his uncle. "I always knew you had a devilish mind. The Black Star Line is one of the most powerful in France, with the fastest, best-built ships on the continent! Their hulls are even copper-lined like British ships. Surely that makes them quite an enviable possession!"

From that point on he had barely heard a word his uncle had told him, for at that moment he had begun to plan. Why, for the paltry price of allowing the wench to become his wife, he would gain a sizeable fleet of ships . . . a small price to pay indeed! With ships of his own—and a line as distinguished and reputable as the Black Star—he could sail them anywhere, to the farthest ports abroad . . . with no restriction on the type of cargo they carried.

That afternoon Trevor had set his plans into motion . . . unaware as yet that his uncle had a few of his own.

Lord Alfred Clairborne had congratulated himself on his own success that day . . . his secret coup. He had half expected his nephew to balk at the match, but instead the young fool had agreed to it. Ah, Trevor, Clairborne had thought triumphantly that day, with all the powders you consume keeping you half in and half out of a daze, it will be a very long time before you discover the disastrous disadvantages of this match you have so eagerly consented to. By then, Trevor, my dear boy, I am afraid it will be too late.

On this particular afternoon, however, there was no smile on Trevor Kenmare's face.

The Duke of Amherst reclined in a padded leather chair behind the closed door of the library in his elegant brownstone residence overlooking the circular gardens of Rampart Row. His brown eyes brooded in his handsome face. Cold and distant, he left an impression of haughtiness most people found offensive. He was a young man much disliked, even by his peers, and the solitary existence he preferred gave Londoners even more to whisper about.

At the moment, his handsome face was white with rage and his mouth formed a thin, tight line.

"You have seen him?" His voice was even and smooth, but with a hard edge to it.

Lord Alfred cleared his throat and shifted nervously in his chair. "No . . . no, I have not," he lied, keeping his voice low.

Trevor Kenmare noticed that his uncle's gaze dropped uncomfortably to the thick Oriental carpet. Eyeing Lord Alfred suspiciously, he asked, "Is he here—in London?"

"No, not in London," the old man replied, "but he is close . . . too close. I was suspicious when I heard that an American sloop of war was sighted stalking in the Bay of Biscay. Five ships were lost to her and taken to Saint Nazaire where they and their cargoes were

auctioned off. I understand that is the usual way privateers dispose of their booty."

Trevor rose stiffly and walked to the window. Drawing aside the heavy velvet drapery, he peered down on the streets below where ladies strolled beneath lace-trimmed parasols and carriages clattered down the narrow cobblestone lanes of Rampart Row. When he turned back to his uncle there was no longer any sign of anger in the dark eyes, no hint of any emotion at all in his face.

"When did you discover that he was alive?"

Tiny beads of perspiration shone on Clairborne's brow. "I have known for some time," he admitted reluctantly. He shot a quick look at his nephew to see his reaction, but saw nothing in that stone-cold face.

"So, you have known 'for some time'," the Duke repeated, stressing each word of the admission, "and you did not see fit to inform me or my father? You understand, of course, that I must have an explanation for that."

Clairborne was quick to give him one. "Just think of the ugly scandal it would have caused. Your poor mother, Lady Margaret, could never have withstood that sort of thing."

Trevor Kenmare did not believe his uncle's excuse for a moment. "Your concern for my poor dead mother is touching, Uncle, particularly since you failed to notice her existence up until the day she died. Can it be that your opposition to my father's marriage to her has finally evoked some guilt in that black heart of yours; or is it that you had reasons of your own for keeping this news to yourself?"

His voice dripped sarcasm, but he turned away, as if neither expecting nor particularly caring for a reply. "So? Why tell me now? Just because some privateer comes close to our shores, you fear the worst? This man is probably some French or American rebel whom King George's Navy has finally caught up with. No doubt he will say anything to save his own neck—even claiming to be someone he is not."

"He does not claim to be anyone other than Captain Youngblood," Lord Alfred said. "For years he lived under the tutelage of a scoundrel named James Youngblood, an American sea captain who was the scourge of British ships on the Atlantic. Apparently, he has taken the name of his mentor and now follows in his notorious footsteps. He has even taken command of Youngblood's ship, the *Rebel*."

"And James Youngblood?" queried Trevor.

"Dead," replied Clairborne. He held his breath for a precious second, hoping that Trevor would not question him further on the man called James Youngblood. If Trevor discovered that the man had been murdered by Michel Delacroix, he would find many more questions to ask and might uncover the truth.

But the moment passed safely when Trevor asked instead, "How is it you know so much about the affairs of these men? Do you place such stock in hearsay, Uncle?"

"My sources are to be trusted," Clairborne said stiffly. "Through them I have kept a close watch on Christian's activities since I learned he is alive. I know a great deal about him."

Trevor raised his eyebrows. "Such as?"

"Such as, after the *Abelard* was sunk he was taken to Fredericksburg in Virginia Colony where he apparently met men much like that scoundrel, Youngblood. It seems they succeeded in inducing him to cast his lot with the colonies. Now he is as traitorous as all of them. You can see the kind of scandal this would have caused had I—"

"Yes, yes," Trevor interrupted impatiently. "Tell me, what kind of man is he?"

"Not so very different from what we remember, as I understand, still arrogant and reckless, still given to emotional outbursts. Trouble still follows in his wake. Some years back he was given command of the *Goodhope*, a square-rigged merchantman, but an incident in Tobago put an end to his career as a merchant skipper. He was forced to defend himself

against a mutinous seaman and ran the man through with his sword. Upon the advice of his no-account friends, he left the island secretly rather than risk reprisal."

Lord Alfred paused but Trevor made no comment. "I lost contact with him then. I'm not certain where he went after that, but he turned up in Philadelphia, some time later, proclaiming himself a Captain in the Continental Navy—an indisputable piece of arrogance when you consider that the American Congress had not yet officially established a navy."

A spark ignited in Trevor's brown eyes. "Does anyone else know who he really is? Has it been noised around yet?"

Lord Alfred shook his head. "Not unless he himself has revealed it, but I rather doubt it. How would it look for a commissioned officer in the American Navy to bear the title of a British noble? No, my guess is that it would behoove him to keep his past a secret from his friends."

"Well," Trevor said, "if you know so much about him, then you must know what he is doing in British waters."

Lord Alfred answered carefully; what he said now must be convincing. "He is so unpredictable, it is hard to imagine what he wants. Perhaps he is here simply to plunder British vessels. He is so bloody arrogant, it would be just like him to harass the Crown's vessels right under the nose of the King's navy just for the sheer hell of it."

Trevor's face came alive suddenly. "No!" he exclaimed, startling Clairborne with the uncharacteristic outburst. "He can do that anywhere on the high seas!" His eyes glowed. "We must assume he is here for a different purpose. The title! The inheritance! Do you suppose—?"

"Oh, Trevor," Clairborne said, dismissing the possibility with a wave of his hand, "he has never shown any interest in the title before, why would he wish to claim it now? Do you think he would betray his fellow

Americans, just to claim his inheritance? Would he leave behind all that excitement and danger just to sail to England to become a duke?"

Trevor's face had frozen into its usual impassivity. His temples were beginning to pound, and although the blood rushed hot and fast through his veins, his face was suddenly ashen.

Good Lord, Clairborne thought, watching his nephew, he's not going into one of his trances—not now!

Lord Alfred had been through it before and knew there was nothing he could do to hurry it along. Dulled brown eyes stared at him fixedly out of a face as white and cold-looking as marble. But Clairborne could tell that there was much going on beneath the death mask by the way the corded muscles stood out in Trevor's neck and by the sheen of perspiration on his brow. A glance down at Trevor's hands revealed them clasped tightly together in a whitened knot of fingers and knuckles, as though clutching something horrible.

It's the pain, thought Clairborne, that damned pain he will never admit to.

What had taken only a minute, seemed to Lord Alfred like an hour. To Trevor Kenmare it seemed more like a lifetime. When the color finally came back to his cheeks and the blood pumped again to his limbs, he rose shakily and walked over to a small corner desk. From its center drawer he took a small packet which he unfolded, spilling its powdered contents into a glass and adding some brandy. He grimaced at the bitter taste as he drank the mixture down. Then, turning slowly back to Clairborne, he said in a low, faint voice, "We must think of something."

"His ship, the *Rebel*, was sighted at Nantes some weeks back. Perhaps if I traveled incognito to France, I could see him and—"

"Never!" Trevor cried. "I will not allow it! You are not to see him or speak to him! I want no contact with him at all, do you understand me? No contact at all!"

Thankful now that he'd refrained from telling Trevor that he had already seen him, Lord Alfred said quickly,

"As you wish. I'll continue to have him watched until we can decide the best course of action."

Trevor settled back into his leather armchair, the effects of the powder chasing not only the anger, but all interest right out of him, leaving his face once again expressionless. Brown eyes stared stonily past Lord Alfred, focusing vaguely on some spot on the far wall.

"Yes," he said, "yes, we will watch him, and we will soon know what plunder my brother Christian seeks."

Shifting his gaze, he shook his head and managed to assume a degree of awareness. "Now, if there is anything else you wish to speak to me about, be quick about it please. I have an important engagement this evening."

At West End? Clairborne wondered with a touch of scorn. He knew all about his nephew's midnight visits to the West End of London. Secretly, he found Trevor's debauchery amusing, as long as the young man was discreet about it and careful to keep his unusual preferences to himself.

"So?" Trevor was saying, "I believe you did say there was something else."

Clairborne cleared his throat. "Yes, there is. The young lady, Mademoiselle Delacroix, has been at Amherst now for over two weeks. I was wondering how long you plan to keep her waiting."

Despite his eagerness to wed the heiress to the Black Star Line, Trevor had contrived to stay in London as long as possible, making it necessary for Clairborne to come begging.

"Very well then," he said now, "go ahead with your bloody party. Invite the whole damned city for all I care, and the countryside too. Let it serve as the formal announcement of the engagement. Plan it for the evening after next."

"The evening after next! But that is such short notice. You must give your guests time to—"

"Must I? You forget, Uncle, that it is I who set so many of their wheels in motion, and if I say that my

announcement party will be the evening after next, then it shall be. Do you doubt they will come?"

The question was met with silence.

"They will come," Trevor smugly concluded. "Now, would you please leave me? I wish to be alone a while before I go out."

Lord Alfred looked up to meet his nephew's dark gaze and shuddered inwardly at the coldness he saw in those brown eyes, the distance growing between the young man and the real world as the medicine he took increased its hold on him.

"Pleasant evening," Clairborne said coyly, but his nephew was no longer listening. . . .

Chapter 14

A sliver of moonlight filtered through the clouds and settled on Amherst Hall, silvering the ivy-covered walls. Within those ancient, armor-covered walls, fires flickered in corner hearths and huge vases of flowers spread their fragrance, creating a cozy atmosphere.

Stifling a yawn, Juliette smiled politely at the portly old biddies and accepted their well wishes gracefully, though she could see through their politeness to their jealous hearts. That none of their daughters had managed to snare the Duke of Amherst annoyed them. Though they showed her every courtesy, it was obvious that they did not like the young Frenchwoman.

For her part, Juliette endured it all as best she could. Oh, to see a friendly face among all these strangers, one that was not eyeing her enviously or leering at her hungrily. Hiding her distaste, Juliette allowed them to fuss and fawn over her. Playing her part splendidly, she smiled courteously at the women and coquettishly at the men while her mind wandered elsewhere.

Ever since the Duke had arrived at Amherst, Juliette had grown more and more apprehensive about her marriage. Certainly the young man was pleasant enough, exhibiting impeccable manners and showing her every courtesy. And Enjolé had been right—he was exceptionally attractive with his dark, brooding good looks. But still, Juliette had doubts.

Their first meeting could not have been under less auspicious circumstances. Annoyed at being kept waiting and bored beyond belief, Juliette had taken to

riding aimlessly about the English countryside, often not bothering to put a saddle on her mount or pull on a pair of boots, preferring instead to ride bareback and barefoot.

Her usually rebellious nature had begun to dictate her every move, and it did the impending union little good when she returned from a wild ride one afternoon only to be escorted—barefoot, her hair hanging loose and wild—into the study to meet her future husband.

The mere fact that he chose not to notice her appearance should have warned her. Anyone else would have commented, either in amusement or scorn. But after a brief glance at her bare feet, followed by a thorough inspection of her body, he addressed her in a tone of polite indifference:

"I am told you are an excellent horsewoman. You will appreciate, then, the fine piece of horseflesh I have recently acquired. I plan to race him at Epsom next spring. You do like the races, don't you?"

Juliette noticed uncomfortably that his eyes never left her as he spoke.

"It is a lovely day," he went on politely as he sipped his tea. Then, "One would never even suspect there is a war on."

Up to that point, Juliette had been too overwhelmed by his presence to comment on either the races at Epsom or the lovely day. His mention of the war, however, she sensed was designed to provoke a response in her—and a negative response at that. There could, after all, be little to say—between two people who were on opposite sides as far as the American Revolution was concerned.

Juliette was quick to give him a response, but certainly not any he expected.

"It would seem, your Grace, that if we are to get on at all, it would be wise to make no mention of the war. There can be no harmony between us on that subject, as I am sure you can well understand."

His reaction was to look even more disinterested, if possible. "As far as I am concerned, the war does not

even exist. I have already considered it, you see, and have come to the conclusion that whether or not those insolent devils achieve their independence is of little consequence to me, so why should I concern myself with it?"

Why, indeed, Juliette thought indignantly, resenting his tone. Wisely, she held her tongue.

"Would you care for some tea?" he asked.

In bare feet she padded across the thick carpet and sat down on the sofa beside him. An awkward silence fell between them that he soon broke.

"Is there anything particular you wish? Just name it and it is yours." The words were generous but the tone was totally impersonal.

"The servants have seen to my needs, thank you," she replied, as excessively polite as he was.

"Good," he replied, "then there is no reason not to proceed with the marriage, is there?"

Juliette glanced up quickly at that. She hadn't expected him to raise the subject so abruptly. "Well . . . I . . . I have not quite decided to . . ." She paused, uncertain of what to say.

"To marry me?" he asked. "Nonsense, it is all decided."

And so it seemed to be. Though after that day he never again mentioned the approaching wedding, he did seem thoroughly accustomed to the idea that she was to become his wife. He even addressed her on occasion as "My Dear," a term he looked decidedly uncomfortable with.

He was gallant and he was charming, but Juliette shivered when she contemplated the things about Trevor Kenmare that she did not know. Sometimes she caught him eyeing her coldly as if she were an object he had recently acquired. But just when she had convinced herself that he sought to have her for his wife for reasons that fell far short of desire, she would look up to find his dark eyes raking over her as if he could not wait to have her. Always, when discovered, he would turn away, as though he had been caught in some

despicable act. He seemed to want her and despise her at the same time, and Juliette was powerless to deal with the confusion it created in her.

What was she doing here? She asked herself that over and over again. But the longer the answer escaped her, the harder it became to raise any objections. Slowly she felt herself drawn into the plans set in motion all around her. Since the Duke's arrival, she'd begun to think of herself as a prisoner within the stone walls of Amherst, where each guest, servant, even the Duke himself, kept an eye on her, scrutinizing every move she made. She imagined them closing in on her and felt at times that she could not breathe. Soon . . . soon it would all come together and crush her!

Sitting with the ladies this evening, she could hear the men laughing and debating as they sat around the cluttered dining table in the next room, their glasses filled with port and rum, their bellies full of the sumptuous meal they had just feasted on.

Blue spirals of smoke curled lazily into the air from the pipes and cigars of those seated before the fire. There were wealthy bankers, stockbrokers, and prominent Fleet Street publishers who had made their fortunes by their own shrewd devices. There were titled noblemen whose wealth was a family tradition. There were Lords of Parliament who had come to debate in private the laws they would enact in the name of King George III.

The Duke of Amherst leaned indolently against the double doors watching his guests with bored, detached interest.

"I say, your Grace, we could arrange a game of hazard to liven things up a bit, what say you to that?" Sir Percival Wyeth inquired, taking two goblets of champagne from the footman's tray and handing one to the Duke.

"I should say not," the Duke replied, "played myself out last month in London."

Sir Percy laughed nervously. "I'd like an opportunity to win back that thoroughbred you won from me at the

gaming tables. Blast, but I hated to lose him. He's out of the Byerly Turk, you know. Finest bloodlines on the continent."

Trevor gave him a small humorless smile. "Pity," he said, "I've taken a liking to the animal. If I change my mind, you can try your hand at winning him back. You might consider a different game, though. It appears that your skill with the dice is as abominable as your luck." With a short formal bow, he added, "You will excuse me, Percy, I've private business to 'tend to.'"

Sir Percy managed a weak smile and a nod as Trevor turned and strolled away, ending the conversation.

Sir Percy's eyes followed the Duke. Only when the double doors were closed behind him, did he turn to say to Sir Rodney Giles, "Lud, but he's a cold fish, that one."

"Devilishly so," agreed Sir Rodney. "Between us, I cannot say I approve of the way he has called this affair together so hastily. Had to cancel my trip to Epsom, don't you know. But I say, did you get an eyeful of the wench? Such beauty makes the inconvenience almost worthwhile."

Giving him a sly glance, Sir Percy replied, "An eyeful is not nearly as much as I'd like to get of that little French beauty."

The remark brought a greedy chuckle from Sir Rodney. He and every other man in the room knew exactly what Sir Percy was talking about, for each harbored his own secret feelings about the French *mademoiselle* who would soon become the Duchess of Amherst. Each imagined her in his own bed, her slim and supple body pressed against his. Even those who were too old to be entertaining such thoughts were dazzled by her breathtaking beauty.

The Duke himself felt it, in spite of his cold detachment. He, too, had felt his pulse quicken at the sight of her. She was extraordinarily lovely! More than that, she was a challenge. The Duke, too, felt the one thing that made her irresistible: the spirit, raw and untamed, beneath the beauty.

From his uncle's description he'd half expected a young, silly girl, but one who appreciated the advantages of marrying a title such as his. He had never expected this strangely hostile beauty, who seemed remarkably unimpressed by all the grandeur. He had been reflecting on that very thing when Sir Percy had interrupted his thoughts.

Sir Percy was still dwelling on the same subject when Sir Rodney poked an elbow into his ribs.

"It looks like Tony Holland is spouting his pompous opinions again," he said, nodding toward a group of men gathered by the fireplace. "Should be some fun in it . . . come along."

Lord Anthony Holland was rising from his seat, lifting his massive bulk to standing position. Reaching up to straighten the peruke on his head, he addressed the group around him, his annoyance evident on his face. "I tell you, gentlemen, that business at Lexington should have warned us. The situation over there has become intolerable."

Sir Brettingham Moore raised an eyebrow. "Really, Tony, that's ancient history. Did you expect them to stand by when their arms and supplies were seized by the King's army? Lexington *was* a warning—their warning to us that they, too, found the situation intolerable."

"Your apologies for those colonial insurrectionists are hardly commendable, Bret," Lord Anthony countered. "Not only did they have the audacity to call the fighting at Lexington a British *massacre* but then they went and declared themselves loyal and dutiful subjects of King George! Of all the impertinence. If I were Lord North, I would burn that bloody country from one end to the other. The sword alone will decide this dispute!"

Lord Leo Cavendish leaned forward, white eyebrows and mustache matching the shoulder-length wig on his head. "A noble attitude for one whose feet remain firmly planted on English soil," he observed wryly.

"Oh, I see," said Lord Anthony, turning his scorn now on Cavendish, "Since you've been to America,

Leo, I suppose you know the solution to this matter of outright rebellion?"

Drawing on his cigar, Lord Leo said, "I know that this is one war which must take place simply to prevent the ruin of the British Empire which will inevitably occur if we are defeated. Already the impact on London has been significant. I was at Garroway's Coffeehouse yesterday and news of the conflict dominated all conversation. Even prices on the stock market have dropped. It appears that Britain is engaged in a fullscale war that it must win quickly, before France and Spain take advantage of it."

"I hear the Spanish Ambassador has been recalled to Madrid," observed Sir Moore. "Funny how your allies have a way of disappearing when you need them."

"The King should have no trouble finding men to fill his ranks," said Lord Anthony. "Catherine of Russia may lend us some, and I'm certain His Majesty can hire enough men from Hanover and Brunswick to add to his troops already in America."

"Well, he had better get them there right quick!" It was Fletcher Hastings, the banker, who spoke up. "I'll wager King Louis of France would love nothing better than to see the power of England weakened."

"And Spain," added Sir Moore. "Don't forget Spain. With her hungry eye on Gibraltar, she has much to gain from this war."

"You are forgetting another element that benefits from this conflict," said Fletcher Hastings. "The privateers. The ones who are getting rich from it. Surely this war looks good to the likes of them."

Sir Moore leaned forward in his seat. "I hear two British merchantmen were captured by rebel privateers, one as she emerged from Belfast Lough and the other not twenty miles out of Bath."

Lord Anthony Holland seized upon the information. "Those traitors! They should be dragged through the streets of London, then hanged! Who are these traitorous rebels who commission their ships to the Americans and persist in attacking ships of the Crown? Who

are these war lovers, these seekers of adventure on the high seas who have so arrogantly turned their noses up at the international naval codes? Who are they who hire out for the purpose of destroying England? Traitors, I tell you!" His voice rose to an angry bellow and heads turned in his direction.

"I hear this fellow who commands the *Rebel* is the worst of the lot," Lord Leo Cavendish remarked.

"The *Rebel*?" someone asked. "Is she American?"

"She has been seen sailing under an American flag, a French flag, even a British flag. She stops at nothing in harassing our commercial vessels, even our naval brigs. Her captain, I hear, is a devilish rascal. His style appears to differ from the customary French approach to an unorthodox degree. From what I understand, he is reckless, arrogant, and extremely cunning—a combination that makes him unpredictable and highly dangerous."

"What is the scoundrel's name?" Lord Anthony demanded.

"Youngblood," Cavendish replied. "Captain Youngblood. My sources tell me the young man is a favorite of Mr. Benjamin Franklin's."

Lord Anthony wrinkled his nose at the mention of Franklin's name. "That old conniver! I wonder what the deuce he's up to now?"

"It's common knowledge, Tony," said Fletcher Hastings. "Our former colonial agent from Pennsylvania is in Europe at this very moment, doing more than just represent the interests of Pennsylvania Colony. Every day he has American visitors at his place of residence in Passay, outside of Paris. I hear this Youngblood chap is a frequent guest."

Lord Anthony sneered at the news. "He's a shrewd one, that Franklin. No doubt he is in Paris at this moment negotiating with the Comte de Vergennes to form some secret alliance against England. Franklin understands European power politics too well. I'm sure he'd like nothing better than to see France and Spain stirring up trouble for us."

His face tightened with anger. "I'll tell you something else, if Franklin is in Paris arranging subsidies through de Vergennes for merchants supplying the colonists with war supplies, then, gentlemen, he is guilty of treason! He is no better than that Captain Youngblood!"

"Drat the French and their incessant meddling!" Lord Leo put in.

"Careful, Leo," cautioned Sir Moore, "do not forget that the Duke plans to wed a Frenchwoman."

Cavendish took a long drag on his cigar. "Yes," he said, "I would not wish to offend either His Grace or the young lady. By the way, what *has* happened to our host?"

Stifling a belch, Lord Anthony shrugged. "Haven't the slightest. He was here a while ago." Peering over the heads surrounding him, he looked right past a young man seated at the table.

Christian Youngblood had heard every word but hadn't spoken one to anyone there. A polite nod here, a smile there . . . just enough to convince the others that he was no different from them.

Turning his eyes away from the men at the fire, he smiled into his glass of port. Then, draining the last of it, he rose and left the room. The time had come, Christian decided, to greet his host.

He didn't have to ask which room the Duke had retired to . . . he already knew.

Chapter 15

Trevor Kenmare grew impatient with his uncle's nervous pacing about the room.

"Why must you always take such a dim view of my activities?" he demanded.

Abruptly the elder man ceased pacing. "Your activities are your own concern, of course," he said placatingly, in an attempt to circumvent an irrational outburst from his nephew. "My concern, however, is the family name. I do not doubt your ability to successfully conclude this transaction, I merely question the potential repercussions to the family. This arrangement with the Turks could disastrously backfire if all avenues are not covered."

"Precisely," said Trevor, "and that is why I am entrusting you with the responsibility. If you fear we have so much to lose, then you will do your utmost to see that we do not fail." He paused to smile sardonically at his uncle. "You know, Uncle Freddy, your concern for the family is touching, especially when you consider that in reality the family consists of just you and I. Am I, therefore, to presume that you really care all that much about me?"

He watched his uncle, his unblinking stare as unnerving as a cat's.

Lord Alfred chose to ignore the question. "What I will do, then, is contact those chaps in Liverpool, the ones who have the contacts with the Turks—"

Glancing up, he stopped short at the sight of Trevor's

face. It had gone wooden and white, the only movement in his eyes which actually seemed to bulge. Then, as Clairborne watched, the old familiar mask of icy indifference appeared.

"So, the prodigal son returns," he said, his voice as expressionless as his face.

Lord Alfred turned to see Christian Youngblood standing in the doorway. Without a word he walked slowly into the room, smiling crookedly.

Trevor remained rigid. Lord Alfred dropped to his chair, eyes now on the black-haired, blue-eyed young man fitted out in velvet elegance. The tense silence was broken finally by Christian's mocking laughter.

"You look as if you'd seen a ghost," he said, addressing Trevor. "I'm sorry if my presence is such a shock."

Trevor swallowed down the lump in his throat and stepped stiffly from behind the desk. "A surprise certainly," he managed to say walking over to the liquor tray, adding suggestively, "and timely."

Christian smiled at that. "You refer to your wedding, I take it."

Pausing, brandy glass in hand, Trevor studied him coldly. "What do you know about that?"

With a shrug and a glance at Lord Alfred, who shifted uncomfortably in his chair, Christian replied, "Nothing, really, except that I've come to offer my good wishes."

"Good wishes indeed!" Trevor snorted, thrusting the glass of brandy into Christian's hand. "When did you ever offer me any good wishes?"

Christian eyed him mockingly. "Why, Trevor, thirteen years is a long time to be away from home and already you seem determined to start an argument. Well, then, perhaps I'd better make the reason for my presence clearer." He downed the brandy quickly in one swallow, then said, "I *have* come for your wedding . . . I have come to see that it does not take place."

"You impertinent—!" Trevor caught himself, biting back the rest of the words, placing tight control on his

growing anger. "I might remind you, Christian, that what I do is no concern of yours, and that includes my marriage. But, I'm curious, what reason would you have for stopping it?" He walked casually back to the desk and seated himself on a corner of it. "Not that I expect a word of truth from your lips, if I remember you at all, and I think I do."

"*Truth?*" Slamming his glass down with enough force to nearly shatter the delicate crystal, Christian stormed forward. "Truth, brother? When did you ever learn to recognize the truth? There are many things I remember too. Your devotion to truth is not one of them!"

Lord Alfred rose and held up a hand to abort the confrontation, but one sharp look from Christian's blue eyes sent him back to his chair.

"My reasons for coming back are my own," said Christian. "The initial reason is no longer important, but something else is and makes me determined that this marriage will never take place. If you doubt my sincerity, then perhaps a warning of what will happen if you insist on going through with it will prove just how determined I am."

Trevor listened in tight-lipped anger, his silent fury twisting his features, draining the color from his face. His breath quickened and his temples began to pound as he heard his brother's ultimatum:

"If you go through with this marriage, Trevor, I'll see the Black Star Line destroyed . . . I'll send every damned ship to the bottom of the sea."

Something clicked in Trevor's racing mind. The Black Star Line? Was that really what Christian was interested in, or . . . ? Remembering his brother's appetite for the ladies, he put that together with the extraordinary beauty of his intended bride and asked casually, "Have you met the future Duchess of Amherst?"

"We've met," came the reply, "and I've already had her."

The blood rose quickly to Trevor's face, then drained, taking all life with it. Forcing himself to stand

erect, he walked behind the desk and withdrew a small packet from the center drawer.

Christian's eyes followed every move as Trevor poured the white powder into his drink and swallowed it down, grimacing partly because of the taste, partly because of the pain. Watching his brother go through the ritual plunged Christian back in time, conscious again of how little some things had changed.

Seated now behind the desk, Trevor raised his dark eyes to look into his brother's bright blue ones. "If you have come back to inform me that I am . . . shall we say . . . receiving damaged goods, then you needn't have bothered. I would be a fool to think such a beautiful woman might still be a virgin. No indeed, I quite assumed her to be less than pure." He gave a short laugh. "I am quite willing to overlook her previous indiscretions, because I am determined to have her . . . now more than ever."

Rising from the desk, he went to the door, moving now with a slight swagger, proof that the powder was taking hold. "I do hope your stay in Cornwall is pleasant, brother. I trust you have found accommodations in the village that are to your liking . . .?"

And then he was gone. He did not see the fires explode in his brother's eyes or his fingers tighten on the rapier at his side.

Lord Alfred turned to Christian now and said, "I see your curiosity was too great to resist."

"You planned on it," replied Christian, pouring himself another brandy. "I've not yet figured out what your motives are, but when I do, I will make you wonder whether it was worth the effort." The threat was unmistakable, even though there was a smile on his lips.

Clairborne's jaw tightened. "My motives are not so very complicated, although I see no particular reason to reveal them to you. And I would not be issuing threats if I were you, Christian, you forget that on this soil you are an enemy. I can have you tossed into prison like *that*." He snapped his fingers.

"Oh I see," said Christian, laughing. "Your plans for me include keeping me locked up for the rest of my life?"

"That amuses you? How amused would you be twenty years from now looking with tired old eyes through bars of the same cell?"

"But, your Lordship," Christian said mockingly, "what court would sentence a duke to life imprisonment? That marvelous sense of justice you English have would never allow it."

Clairborne glared at him. "You are still the same defiant ruffian you always were. How dare you link that title to your miserable self! Who do you think would believe you? A rebel pirate claiming to be an English duke? The idea is laughable! Besides, you forget that here in England you are a traitor to the crown, a rebel, noble or not. Do you think you would be hailed for your heroics?"

Christian shrugged. "Perhaps not, but I wonder what sort of evidence you can come up with that would move a court to such a decision. I can just see their faces as I tell them how I was sent away from home as a boy only to be captured at sea and forced into a life of piracy unbecoming a British nobleman. What a poor, wretched victim of circumstances I am!"

Clairborne eased away from him. Damn, that insolent young bastard! But he must not let Christian drive him into a rage, he must think clearly. Tread carefully, Clairborne warned himself.

"Do you think I don't know about the secret communications you receive?" he said now. "The ones that come directly from Philadelphia and bear the initials CSC on them? The ones that send you on your murderous rampages across the Atlantic? Capturing the court's sympathy with the sad tale of your abduction as a boy might work as you suggest, but what would be the reaction to the discovery that you are nothing but a common spy?"

Lord Alfred saw Christian's eyes narrow and pressed his advantage. "CSC . . . Committee of Secret Corre-

spondence. They keep their identities well hidden. Even at Whitehall, there are no accusations, only assumptions. I, however, do not assume anything. I have made it my business to know that it is men like Franklin and Jefferson and Adams who dictate your movements!"

"So, you've done your homework," said Christian, looking bored. Turning, he walked away, but Lord Alfred followed, a safe distance behind.

"You colonial scum are all alike," Clairborne sneered, "ungrateful malcontents who look upon yourselves as angels."

Christian smiled wryly at that. "If we were angels, there would be no reason for government. If we were evil, as you suggest, then we'd truly be in wretched condition and no form of government could help us. There is, however, sufficient reason, charity, and virtue among us to suggest the possibility of a good form of government based on the general principle of consent. I wonder if a man like you can understand what that means?"

Lord Alfred was unimpressed. "There is also sufficient greed and ignorance and corruption among you to require restraint," he observed sourly.

"Precisely." Christian nodded. "The kind of restraint traditionally imposed by government. Of course, the only solution is to devise a government that will give optimum scope to the former and raise the most efficient barriers against the latter."

"And you think you have found the answer to that?"

"We think we have, and we'll not tolerate your heavy-handed interference in the realization of our goals."

"Our interference? You forget that English blood flows through your veins!"

"A mere technicality," Christian observed, "and one I will not hesitate to use to achieve my ends, or those of my government, if need be."

Lord Alfred struggled to maintain his composure. He had a few daggers of his own to throw and hurled

one now. "Tell me, what do you think will become of the young lady your brother plans to wed?"

Ah yes, thought Clairborne triumphantly, seeing the way his nephew's infernal eyes lit up at the mention of her. He turned on his heels and strode for the door. "Think about that for a while," he said over his shoulder. "Oh, and see that you are not here in the morning." He had not forgotten the way his arrogant nephew had ordered him off his ship.

Chapter 16

The evening had been a difficult one. Unable to sleep, Juliette paced nervously about her bedroom. Long past midnight, she slipped into a satin dressing gown, picked up her lamp and left the room.

A sliver of light beneath the study door caught her eye. Like a curious child she tiptoed closer, straining to hear any sound from within. She heard nothing and frowned, thinking that one of the servants must have left a lamp lit. For half a moment, she let herself think that it might be . . . Oh, why bother even thinking about *him*? It was obvious that he'd only wanted one thing from her. Why else had he disappeared after that day without a word, like a thief in the night? Angrily, she grabbed for the door latch and entered the wood-paneled study. Her steps were muffled on the thick carpet as she went quickly to the lamp and bent to extinguish the flame.

"I take it you suffer from it also."

She whirled and stared into the shadows beyond the light of the lamp. Lord Alfred was seated in a deep armchair, a glass of brandy at his side.

"And what would that be?" she asked.

"Insomnia, I've had it all my life. But you are so young and healthy, my dear, I would not have thought that you might suffer from the bloody ailment."

She was uncomfortably aware of his eyes on her. Pulling her dressing gown tighter, she stepped away from the lamp, farther into the shadows. "Not at all, I

merely came down for a cup of tea. When I saw the light, I thought one of the servants had—”

“The servants in this house know better than to leave a lamp burning,” he said dryly.

Juliette already regretted the fact that she had entered into conversation with him instead of excusing herself and leaving the room. “Someone must have been here then,” she said.

Lord Alfred gave her a strange look. “My thought precisely. Now, who do you suppose was in this room and left suddenly at my approach?”

His steady stare made her feel she must reply. “I really couldn’t imagine. I’m no lover of mysteries myself; I find things of that sort quite distasteful. Besides, you don’t know for certain that anyone *was* here, so why trouble yourself over it?”

He tapped his chin with a thin finger. “Why indeed? But the windows were open wide, quite as though someone had left hurriedly, should I not trouble myself over *that*?”

Juliette replied dryly, “Perhaps there is a player in this game you know nothing about.”

Conceding with a shrug, he said, “Ah well, I admit there are games being played here at Amherst, but life itself is one vast game, is it not? As for unseen players, I doubt that. They are all present and accounted for. You, too, are a player. Indeed, you play a most important part.”

“Your Lordship speaks in riddles,” Juliette said sharply, growing more annoyed by the minute. “When you truly consider it, my own part is negligible. I can, if I choose, terminate my role by simply returning to Paris.”

“Your reasoning is logical,” answered Clairborne, “but hardly sound. Pity. It appears I have overestimated you. I had thought you would be quick to snatch up what is being offered.”

She came forward then, losing the tight grip she had on her anger. “And what *is* being offered me? *My* ships?”

"Ah, but my dear child, they are not your ships, are they? Your father saw to that, I'm afraid."

The plain truth of that silenced her.

"I'm sure," said Lord Alfred, "you are a sensible girl after all. Who can say that you and my nephew will not make a most splendid couple? He does, at times, have a marvelous sense of humor . . . so very dry. In time you may come to find the arrangement to your satisfaction." Ignoring the warning signs in her green eyes, he went on, "His Grace can be a bit trying at times but when you come to know him as I do, I'm certain you will find his . . . peculiarities, shall we say? . . . slight in comparison to his good nature."

Juliette stared at him. Was he mocking her? Good nature? She had seen her future husband smile but once. Even then she had not been convinced of his sincerity. Despite Trevor Kenmare's good looks, she sensed too much in him that resembled Lord Alfred, and her instincts cautioned her to be wary.

"Think about the future," Lord Alfred was saying. "Think of what he is offering you. It all lies before you, Juliette. Can you really afford to turn your nose up at it?"

"You speak to me as if I were an orphan you found begging in the streets. I should remind His Lordship that I was quite happy in Paris with my Godmother, and I am seriously considering returning to France."

Lord Alfred's fingers tightened around each other. "You are a very stubborn—and foolish—young lady," he said sharply.

Juliette felt he was deliberately provoking her to anger. But why? She watched him warily from the shadows.

"If I am such a stubborn, foolish girl, why do you want me to bear the title of Duchess of Amherst?"

Clairborne sighed. "Juliette, Juliette, why not just accept your destiny?"

Somehow she found the courage to step forward and answer. "The course of my destiny eludes me, but from

what I have seen here, I am almost certain it does not lie at Amherst."

Clairborne dropped all pretense then. His voice low, threatening, he said, "I have gone to a great trouble arranging this match. My nephew has agreed to it and he is not a man to be denied once he has his mind set on something. I think you should reconsider your destiny. If you know what is good for you, you will go through with this marriage."

The green fires blazed defiantly in Juliette's eyes. "And if I refuse?"

Studying his nails, Lord Alfred assumed a bored expression. With one simple sentence, he sprang his trap and imprisoned her in it. "If you refuse," he replied, "your Captain Youngblood will be tossed into prison and kept there for the remainder of his life."

"What? But why?" She gaped at him. "What has he done to warrant such a threat?"

Confusion whirled about her, filling her with a thousand questions. Why, on God's earth, would Lord Alfred wish to see Christian Youngblood imprisoned? Was he despicable enough to see an innocent man's life ruined just because she refused to marry the Duke? But . . . was Christian as innocent as she presumed? Another unanswered question, and one she was beginning to ask herself more and more often.

Clairborne's reply sent a chill down her spine. "What he has done to me is of little consequence, but you, my dear, what he has done to *you* is altogether different." He smiled then. "You could say I am doing you a favor . . . yes, you could say that. He is a pirate, my dear. A libertine! He runs with a wicked lot of brigands who loot and plunder indiscriminately. I am saving you from that infamy."

Juliette was in no mood to be rescued, particularly when attempted with as little honor as she sensed in Lord Alfred.

"I did not ask for your help," she shot back, "and now that you have offered it, I must refuse!"

He gave her a derisive look. "Your sense of independence is admirable, but I must insist that you be reasonable and consider the facts." His voice hardened. "Fact one, it was your father's wish that you marry His Grace. To insure that wish he stipulated in his will that the Black Star Line should pass to my nephew. Consider, my dear, that it will not be totally yours with my nephew retaining majority hold, but unless you do marry him, it will never be yours. Fact two, this affair you are having with Christian Youngblood is merely a passing infatuation. I can even be persuaded to overlook your obvious lack of judgment in choosing such a man for your lover."

Juliette stormed up to him. "You go too far! I feel compelled to tell you that while I find you most distasteful and extremely rude, I do not fear you! And if I am to be the Duchess of Amherst, you'd do well to treat me with a little more respect than you have shown this evening!"

Clairborne rose without a word and strolled over to the tall double windows. Pulling them open, he stood for a moment silhouetted against the moonlight. When he spoke again, it was as though he had heard only what he wanted to hear. With the moon at his back and his face bathed in shadows, he looked sinister, like some ghostly image that had stepped in out of the night.

"Consider fact three then," he said softly, "Youngblood killed your father."

His mocking emphasis made Juliette gasp and left her speechless. The awful revelation was dropped into her lap like a bomb. Sauntering by her, a diabolical gleam in his eye, he added, "I dare say he neglected to tell you that while he was cooing in your ear."

Juliette had gone pale at first, but now her face was burning up. It was no use challenging him. Somehow she sensed he was telling the truth. She felt sick. Christian had killed her father! The fact exploded in her mind, and whatever feelings of resentment she had where her father was concerned were slight in compari-

son with the awful feeling of betrayal sitting in the pit of her stomach.

She shivered in uncontrollable shame when she thought of how she had allowed Christian Youngblood's hands to explore her body, how she had shamelessly responded with her own heated emotions. She had yielded to a murderer! A thief stealing her passion! An outraged voice screamed in her mind. "He knew!" He knew who she was and still he used her. He had made love to her with a new tenderness that had left her with the impression that he cared while all the while he was her father's murderer and had never thought to confess it to her. Was it because he was afraid she would not understand, or was it because it made no difference to him at all?

Juliette's head was beginning to ache as it invariably did when she was overtired and her thoughts were spinning wildly. Was it possible that, just a few short weeks ago, she had been happy and secure, leading an utterly frivolous and carefree life, only to be thrust into a topsy-turvy world where nothing made sense and treachery lay around every corner? A few weeks ago she had had everything to live for. Now, everything had suddenly and cruelly turned sour.

Pressing her fingers to her temples to ease the pounding, she was unaware that Lord Alfred had gone to the desk and removed a small packet. She barely heard him when he pressed it into her hand, saying, "Here, put this in your tea. It will make your headache go away and help you sleep."

She looked at him blankly. Glancing down unsteadily at the packet in her hand, she grimaced in pain and left him. Taking his advice, she emptied it into the cup of tea she hastily boiled in the kitchen and took back to her room. He was right, the heavy pounding in her temples gradually eased and at last she began to relax. Sleep came, lulling her into a dreamy state of forgetfulness . . . and there was so much to forget.

Minutes later . . . or was it hours? . . . she was being shaken awake by a rough hand on her shoulder.

As her mind returned to consciousness, she heard a voice saying angrily into her ear:

"Damn it, what the hell did you take to make you sleep so deeply?"

Her eyes fluttered open and she bolted upright. A quick disoriented look about revealed the lamp where she'd left it and the teacup half empty on the dressing table. She sprang from the bed, retreated to the wall, then whirled to face him, her eyes large and glassy bright, two emerald stones glistening in the darkness.

Christian Youngblood sat down on the vacant bed and watched her. The moonlight sifting through the leaded panes sent shimmers of light washing over her face and little streamers of gold dancing through her dark hair. Through the sheer fabric of her gown, her slim body was outlined as though she were wearing nothing at all. He rose and went to her, drawing close enough to see the evidence of her tears.

"Why have you been crying?" he asked softly.

Juliette tried to slip by him, but he blocked her way. Desperately she tried to avoid his eyes. Damn you, she screamed in her mind. Damn you and your lying eyes! With a muffled sob, she turned her head so that he could not see the tears rushing into her eyes.

He put his hands on her shoulders and felt her go rigid at his touch. Could it be she was angry that he had stayed away these past few days? Christ, but he had no choice! It was just too dangerous to be lurking about Amherst with his brother and his uncle present.

He spun her around to face him. "What is it? Why are you angry? Because I didn't return sooner?"

She spoke low, struggling to keep her voice from breaking. "No, it's not that." It was a lie, of course, but she would die before she ever let him know just how much she had longed for his return these past few days. "It's just that I cannot have you in my room when I am to be married soon."

Christian's face went pale. "Married? Not to Trevor! Don't tell me you're going to go through with it after

what we . . . well . . . Marry Trevor? My God, Juliette, you cannot!"

Her eyes flashed at his endless impertinence. "You dare tell me what I can and cannot do? Do you think we are aboard the *Rebel* now, *Monsieur Capitaine*, that you can order me about? What is it about men that they cannot stop interfering? First my father, and now you! Well I'll not be a pawn to any man's whims any longer."

She threw her head back, whipping her dark hair about her face, and laughed harshly. "You know, at first I objected to my father's demand that I marry Trevor, but now it no longer offends me."

Suddenly suspicious, Christian said, "There's something behind this, something you're not telling me."

"Nothing!" she cried. "Nothing except *my* wishes for a change!"

"Then pack your bag and leave here, because I know what your wishes really are, no matter what you say." He grasped her roughly and shook her, his voice grating harshly in her ear. "You don't know what he's like . . . what he's capable of! Damn you, maybe you can bear it, but I tell you Juliette, I cannot! How do you think I'll feel knowing that you and he . . ." Biting back the rest, he released her with a shove that sent her stumbling backwards. "You're coming with me," he ordered.

Juliette backed away, shaking her head. "No, you don't understand. Things are different. I . . . I was so innocent . . . so silly. And you . . . you were nothing more than a . . . a passing fancy." She forced a laugh. "I've always been such a fickle creature . . . surely you could tell?"

She wished desperately that his male pride might be hurt as keenly as his betrayal had wounded her. She continued frivolously, watching with morbid satisfaction the way her words affected him. "I thought you guessed that you meant nothing to me. You're just a common pirate . . . why should I settle for that when I can have so much more?"

He grabbed her then. "Do you think I believe a word of it?"

"It's true!" she protested. "True!"

"Why?" he demanded. "Because you say it?" Pulling her close, he said, "Your eyes say something else. While you tell me how much you hate me, your eyes tell me otherwise. Those green eyes of yours continue to betray you, Juliette. They are your curse . . . and mine."

Pressing her unyielding body against his, he brought his mouth down brutally on hers. When he finally released her, he could see her small, round breasts heaving heavily against the thin fabric of her dressing gown. The sight of them, erect little nipples straining against the flimsy fabric, only hardened him in his purpose. He advanced toward her now with only one desire . . . to have her.

"No!" she cried, "You cannot do this! I'm to be married . . . !"

"Like hell you are!" He swept her into the air and, clamping a hand over her mouth to silence her, flung her down on the bed, straddling her with his knees. "Try to control yourself. You don't want to wake the house, do you?"

Holding her down, he removed his hand from her mouth only to replace it with his lips, kissing her savagely while his hands tore at her clothing. Striking out blindly, Juliette sought to tear at his flesh wherever she could get a piece of him, but with his full weight pressing down on her, her strength soon gave way. She lay breathless, half-choking, half-sobbing with exhaustion. When at last she had ceased struggling, he slid himself roughly between her legs and penetrated her without ceremony, without tenderness, without caring that he was once again using her to satisfy his lust.

When it was over and his ragged breathing had steadied, he rolled to the side and turned sleepy blue eyes on her. In a hushed voice he asked, "Do you really hate me as much as you pretend to, rosebud?"

Juliette bristled at the sound of his voice, so sweet

and casual. Slipping from the bed she walked to the window, disregarding her nakedness. "More!" she lashed out at him. "Much, much more!"

It infuriated her that he could lie there, one arm bent behind his head, an impish gleam in his blue eyes.

"I have no intention of becoming your mistress," she said flatly. "Now, will you please leave my room, or must I scream and bring the entire household?"

He left the bed to stand naked beside her at the window. Spinning her around by her elbow, he asked, with a look that tore her, "Is that how you really feel?" Her silence only provoked him. "Look at me, God-damnit! Is that how you feel?"

Juliette looked into his eyes, and for a moment . . . the barest instant . . . she was painfully reminded of all the conflicting feelings she had for this man. With a muffled sob she broke away from him. Dark, cruel questions sprang at her, making her decision even more painful. Yes, she was sending him away, but why? Was it really because he had hidden the truth about her father? Did she really care all that much about that? Or was it . . .

Lord Alfred's terrible threat rang in her ears, left her weak with indecision. She retreated several paces away, green eyes blazing. "Yes," she hissed, "yes, that is how I feel. What more do you want of me?"

For a long moment their eyes locked in silent combat. Then Christian Youngblood spun around and strode to where he had thrown his clothes. He dressed quickly, saying not a word, but she could hear the sound of his breathing. Savagely he pulled on his boots, then stood to face her, feet planted apart, thumbs hooked arrogantly into his belt. He looked at her. Juliette shrank from that look . . . so deadly cold. For a moment, he seemed about to speak. Then, deciding against it, he reached angrily for his coat and stormed from the room.

When he was gone, the silence of the night closed in on her. Sleep would not come. In its place hot, salty tears trickled down her cheeks. By the time dawn's

light appeared, there were no more tears to shed, and the truth of what she had done was painfully apparent.

Yes, she had sent him away, but she could no longer tell herself it was because she hated him. She had spared him the awful sentence Lord Alfred had threatened. By doing so, she had passed a cruel sentence on herself that began two weeks later when she married the Duke of Amherst.

Chapter 17

"I think the emeralds suit you best," the Duke of Amherst commented to his wife as she dressed for dinner. With an impatient wave of his hand, he sent her maid scurrying from the room. Then, picking up the exquisite emerald necklace from its bed of ebony velvet, he bent to fasten it around the Duchess's slender neck.

Their eyes met in the mirror briefly before he looked away. "Yes," he said, stepping back to admire her, "Emeralds match the color of your eyes and bring out the dark richness of your hair. You really do wear jewels quite well, Juliette, I should like to see you wearing them more often. I have certainly given you enough of them." He motioned toward the silver jewel box on the dressing table.

"And who is to see them?" his wife demanded. "The servants? We have been married four months and I've not been out of this house, although I dare say you've been too busy in London to notice. Let me see, do you really think the servants would appreciate the emeralds tonight . . . or perhaps this?"

She reached past the strands of lustrous pearls and glinting gold bracelets and picked up a pair of dangling filigree earrings studded with magnificent fiery opals. Then, tossing them aside, she reached for a blue-stoned ring, the one whose striking color reminded her of another man's eyes.

"Do you think the servants would like to see the sapphire this evening?" she asked.

Trevor Kenmare watched her half-amused, half-annoyed. "One of the things I admire most about you, my dear, is your frankness. But I do beg you, do not throw one of your bloody tantrums this evening, not when we have guests downstairs. Your point is well taken, however. I apologize for neglecting you, but it is I who should be pitied for all the ghastly business matters that take so much of my time. As for getting away from Amherst, I will consider taking you to London with me one of these days. Come . . . are you ready?"

They descended the curved staircase, her gloved hand resting lightly on his sleeve. As they reached the bottom, he turned to her. "I quite forgot to tell you, but after dinner I must return to London." Seeing the angry light in her eyes, he quickly added, "Now, Juliette, I have told you that my business is very important. There is a parcel of land I wish to purchase, and my attorneys advise me the papers are drawn and ready for my signature."

"But Trevor, I . . ."

"Yes, I know," he said, "It is such short notice, but unavoidable I'm afraid."

"I only meant . . ."

Again he would not let her finish. Assuming an overly apologetic tone, he said, "I know I said I would take you to London, but you'll never be ready in time. Perhaps next time. You do understand, my darling, don't you?"

Juliette looked into his dark brown eyes, the eyes of her husband . . . of a stranger . . . and decided to let him have his way. She knew he was playing with her and that his contrite expression was as contrived as the terms of endearment he used. She was no more his darling than he was hers, and they both knew it.

Contrary to what he believed, she hadn't the slightest intention of protesting his unexpected trip to London. In fact, she had breathed a sigh of relief at the news. For as lonely as it sometimes got within the ancient walls of Amherst Hall, she could not say she was

unhappy when her husband was absent. At least then she did not have dark eyes forever watching her, nor lie awake tensely in bed at night wondering whether he would visit her room and attempt to make love to her.

He would come to her only when he had had too much to drink. Surprisingly, she never saw him touch liquor during the day, except occasionally to wash down his medicine. Still, he would appear at her bedroom, obviously drunk—too drunk to display any finesse in his lovemaking, or to arouse any feelings other than revulsion in his wife. Why did he even bother? she wondered dully, when he had not once—in all his attempts—successfully consummated their marriage? As a lover he was incompetent, but she was, after all, his wife. She was his to do with as he pleased, even to embarrass her with his clumsiness and kill her with his cold indifference.

He was a cold man, unaffected by her needs as a woman, indifferent to the loneliness that engulfed her at Amherst. He was handsome and desirable only on the surface. Beneath his dark good looks lay a frozen heart. He was passionless while passion surged through her young body, begging to be tapped. He was spiritless, while the fires of a rebellious spirit burned in her emerald eyes. He was insensitive to the appeal that other men found so compelling in her.

All in all, she had grown, in a very short time, to be repelled by her husband. To the rest of the world, however, they were a couple to be envied. Juliette managed to play her part splendidly, keeping her cynical thoughts hidden behind the artificial brilliance of her smile.

Oh God! she thought now as she accompanied him into the room full of people, another long, boring evening of entertaining his guests. She sighed, ignoring Trevor's dark eyes on her, warning her to behave, and allowed him to escort her into the dining room where their guests awaited the Duke and Duchess of Amherst.

Juliette was not the only one who wondered about the Duke's increasingly frequent trips to London. Lord Alfred Clairborne wondered too, and was more concerned than anyone could have guessed. After all, he knew the Duke far better than anyone else did.

He had been away for two months, spending a few weeks on the sunny Italian coast to ease the arthritis nagging at his joints before returning to England to conclude some business in Truro. No sooner had he arrived at the Greenmeadow Inn in Truro than he began to hear whispers about the young Duke.

At this point they were nothing more than rumors, for his nephew exercised extreme caution where his private life was concerned. Still, Lord Alfred was worried. He knew about the London gaming houses where Trevor lost large sums, yet somehow managed to win with enough consistency to have in his possession the markers of some very important gentlemen. He was aware, too, of what everyone politely called the Duke's fondness for drink. He knew, when no one else did, about the Duke's other habits. But in spite of Trevor's discretion, the rumors persisted.

The only solution, Clairborne knew, was to speak to him and so he called on him at Rampart Row.

His nephew's greeting was hardly cordial. "I was wondering when you might show up," said Trevor.

Ignoring the jibe, Lord Alfred responded smoothly, "As a matter of fact, I have been quite busy. But had I known you were in London, I would have come sooner."

"You always place such trust in your informants," Trevor replied. "Haven't they kept you advised of my comings and goings as they usually do?"

"Your own advisers are as thorough as mine," Clairborne remarked.

"So? What do you want, Uncle, an official report of my activities in London? Is that why you've come? Very well then, you shall have it. As you know, that property in Leicestershire became available and I

signed the papers for it this morning. Unfortunately, that is the *only* thing that has gone right. You may be aware that Wilshire Mining shares dropped considerably. I can tell you I have taken quite a loss. It has become necessary for me to . . . well . . . to recoup my losses in other ways."

"I see," said Clairborne dryly. "I suppose that means at the gaming tables?"

Trevor looked at him sharply. "What concern is that of yours, may I ask?"

"Trevor, be sensible. You are a married man now, you simply cannot continue in the same irresponsible way as before. People are already talking. They wonder why you spend so much time away from your new bride. Surely you must know that there are more than a few men who would love to amuse the Duchess while the Duke is away." He had begun to pace about the room. "Talk has you keeping a mistress . . . or several of them."

Trevor laughed harshly. "Surely you do not believe the rumors? My dear Uncle, Juliette is everything a man could wish for. I assure you I am not immune to her loveliness. I will not, however, discuss with you the quality or the frequency of my relations with my wife, just as I will not discuss with you my private activities here in London."

As he spoke, he reached for his velvet coat and slipped it on.

"It truly amazes me that you place such stock in hearsay, Uncle, particularly when you know that we have always been gossiped about. Personally, I find it all rather boring. Oh, if only my life were as exciting as the gossip-mongers claim it is. But, Uncle, you do me a grave disservice to suggest that I am, in some manner, failing in my responsibilities as a husband. Indeed, you misjudge me. Now, if you will excuse me . . . ? I have a previous appointment."

He left, a mocking smile on his lips, but when he climbed into his waiting carriage, the smile disap-

peared. He detested being spoken to in such a manner, as though he were a schoolboy bent on mischievous pranks. Damn the old man and his incessant meddling!

The carriage drew up in front of an elegant town-house in the fashionable West End of London. Trevor stepped down and handed the driver the fare. "Be back here in one hour," he instructed him. Then, looking quickly about, he walked up the steps and rapped sharply on the door with the tip of his walking stick. As the door drew open, he straightened and held his head up just a bit in order to look down his nose at the pretty young woman who greeted him.

"Good evening, Your Grace," she said, bowing her head slightly as he stepped past her.

He removed his gloves, allowing his eyes to pass slowly over her. Such a delightful creature she was, the corners of her mouth upturned just slightly, almond-shaped blue eyes that peered up at him through long, dark lashes. Turning, she led the way, her silk skirts rustling in sweet seduction as she walked, his eyes burning upon her. So well did he know that body that he could trace every line, every curve and swell as if he could see right through the fabric of her dress . . . right down to where the soft mound lay demurely hidden between her smooth, white thighs. The color of flax, it was, tightly curled and coarse, but no less fair than the long straight hair that ran like cornsilk down her back without so much as a ripple.

She shivered, sensing his gaze. Of all her clients, only this man's visits were anticipated with dread . . . His visits were prearranged, paid in advance to relieve him of the tedium of the transaction upon his arrival—and to insure a speedy departure. Together they would ascend the carpeted staircase and turn off into a room lit by the flickering lights of oil lamps set low.

The room he always chose was made of glass, its walls adorned with tall windows possessing hundreds of leaded panes, creating an illusion of immense space. Each window was separated from its neighbor by a narrow mantle of velvet, blood red in color, behind

which stood floor to ceiling mirrors. With the mantles drawn back and the mirrors exposed, one had the feeling of being suspended inside a giant glass bubble floating amongst the stars. Delicately tufted arm chairs stood on either side of a canopied four-poster draped with a coverlet of pink satin trimmed with the finest lace. In the corner a fire burned steadily, sending shadows undulating across the walls.

The splendor of the room would inevitably be lost, however, in his assault on her. The sounds that tore from his throat bore no resemblance to the eager panting and breathless grunts of sexual satisfaction of other men. Low moans escaped him and involuntary sobs betrayed a pain she could not understand. He would stroke her flesh without feeling it, call her name without hearing it. And she would despise him for the painful liberties he took, to which he was entitled because of the extra price he paid.

It had become impossible to hide the bruises from her other customers. One by one she lost them, until there was only he, inflicting his painful lust on her, and her submitting because he was the only customer left who paid. She was his . . . his woman . . . his possession for as long as it was his fancy to keep her. She despised him, yet she encouraged him to return, for without him she knew she would be turned out in favor of a girl whose young body was not as marked as hers.

For him, the humiliation in her eyes was the carefully contrived result of an evening that brought him no pleasure but satisfied a much stranger need.

That sort of thing, however, would never have worked on the girls of the theatre district. Most of them had grown up in the squalid, septic conditions of the slums where communal facilities had hardened them to life's lesser humiliations. Their bodies had often been ravaged by lustful brothers or drunken fathers, an ever-constant reminder of their lot in life.

Trevor would always pick out the prettiest, cleanest girl, one who still held her head high and whose mouth showed none of the lines that came from hard living.

He would find her selling matchbooks and, tossing a few coins into her tray, he would follow her into the dark recessed doorway of a building with black rotting walls, to a small stuffy room where the musty odor of mildew crept into his nostrils and the dust made him cough.

If she went to remove her shawl, he would stop her. If she lit the lamp, he would extinguish it. Carefully he would tell her that he had had no wish to know her name.

His indifference should not have surprised any of them, most of their customers preferred brief, impersonal encounters. But this man was different, for it seemed that all the walls they built around themselves crumbled in his presence. They would stand before him with their vulnerability laid as bare as their bodies.

He would lie down beside the girl he chose, fully clothed, making not a move to touch her. At length, even the rise and fall of her breasts would be barely perceptible, with nothing in the room to signify the presence of another human being. So obscure and insignificant would she become to him that he would lie there, his trousers opened, stroking himself as though he were quite alone, seeing to his own pleasure.

When all that remained was the ability to provide the basest form of pleasure, he deprived them even of that.

Tonight, as Trevor ascended the carpeted staircase with the pretty blond girl at his side, he asked himself whose humiliation he sought. The answer did not surprise him. It was his own humiliation he sought. His own.

Chapter 18

"Good evening, Trevor."

He whirled at the sound of the voice. What little color there was left in his ashen face drained rapidly at the sight of Juliette standing in the doorway to his study on Rampart Row, a look of impatience on her delicate features.

"Juliette! What are you doing here? When did you arrive?" He made a point of taking his time removing his gloves, but he could not hide his shock at seeing her.

She moved aside to let him enter the study. "I arrived early this evening," she said, following him in.

"You should have let me know you were coming," he said with a touch of annoyance.

"But, Trevor," she replied coyly, "you seemed so upset at leaving Amherst this time, I thought I'd come to cheer you up. Business matters can be so dreadfully boring. Besides, I've never seen London." Actually, waking in a rebellious mood, she had decided that one more day at Amherst was more than she could stand and had immediately arranged to follow him.

Trevor sighed impatiently. "Well I could have sent a carriage for you had I known. As far as seeing London, I'm afraid you will have to do that without my company. You have caught me at a very bad time, Juliette. The business I came for is at a very delicate stage, and I cannot spare any time for sightseeing."

"What business is that?"

His dark eyes scanned the room nervously. "Why, I

told you all about it. It was . . . property, yes, you remember, that property in Leicestershire. Really, my dear, I don't know where your mind is when I speak to you, half the time you are not even listening and then you question me endlessly." He assumed his most put out expression.

By this time Juliette knew what was expected of her. "Of course," she said contritely. "It must have slipped my mind. How selfish of me to think only of myself when you, poor dear, have been out until all hours, haggling over some very important transaction, no doubt." Her voice, though a soft purr, nevertheless was tinged with scorn. Their eyes met briefly and Trevor turned away.

"Oh, look here," she said, spinning him back around and pointing to his waistcoat. "There's a button missing . . . I wonder how that happened."

Quickly Trevor masked his shock behind forced anger. "That stupid maid! Hasn't she yet learned how to sew on a button? If I lose one more to her ineptitude, she'll be out of a post without a reference from this house!" And without bothering to bid his wife good-night, he stalked off, leaving Juliette alone in the study.

The following morning she awoke late. The cobblestone lanes of Rampart Row were bustling with activity, despite an overcast sky. Staring listlessly out the window, Juliette felt the chill of the sunless day creeping into her bones. No wonder there was so much smoke and soot on the buildings, she thought, wrinkling her nose at the broken skyline of chimneys, each spewing thick black smoke. A shudder seized her. She felt so alone. Not even her husband was any sort of companion to her. God, how she disliked this man she had married, how she distrusted him!

Here she was, married to a man she scarcely knew, one who could never, *ever* understand the kind of passion she was capable of, or how her young body ached for fulfillment. He could never fill the intense longing she had inside of her, the one even she did not fully comprehend, but which she could no longer deny.

It had plagued her ever since that day when she had lain naked on the hay-strewn floor of a blacksmith's shed, the sounds of thunder rumbling overhead, and another man's arms wound tightly around her . . . the man who had stolen her virginity from her like a common thief . . . the man who had taught her the meaning of passion and her own capacity for it.

He had taught her what it was like to soar among the clouds while being consumed by earthly desire. He had made her aware of the demands of her own hungry body. He had made her ashamed of wanting to learn so quickly, yet eager to learn all she could. He had turned her into a greedy, passion-seeking creature. While she died of shame each time she thought of it, she could no longer deny that her very soul had been awakened. She knew now that her fantasies of romantic passion were not figments of a spirited imagination, but that such a thing existed. But knowing only plunged her into a well of despair when she realized that, by marrying a man like Trevor Kenmare, she had thrown all possibility of satisfying that passion away.

She tried to blot out the memory of Christian Youngblood, but it was no use! The harder she tried to forget him, the more her mind seemed to revolt, planting thoughts of him everywhere until she could no longer escape the disheartening truth.

Love? Did she fancy herself in love with the man who had raped her, who had treated her no better than a common whore? The thought of it made her blush with fury, and she fought against it. Yet . . .

What was there about him that drew her like a magnet? She hated him, and desired him. She found his arrogance exasperating yet appealing to her own reckless nature. She condemned his acts of piracy, yet could feel the excitement of the life racing in her blood. She never wanted to see his face again . . . and knew she would surely die if she did not!

She turned from the window, her heart as heavy as the London sky.

Later, freshly bathed, her hair tied back softly with a

velvet ribbon that matched the color of her eyes, Juliette emerged from her room. A swish of petticoats caught her attention, and she spied the maid just entering Trevor's room. Calling to her, careful to keep her voice down in case Trevor was still at home, Juliette told her in a friendly, conspiratorial way, "You must be more careful when sewing His Grace's buttons. One popped off his waistcoat yesterday." She rolled her eyes upward in mock exasperation. "Do try, won't you? Or I fear his temper may be the cause of your regret."

The woman looked at her blankly. "But His Grace never gives me his things to sew. Sends them out, he does."

Juliette frowned at that. "I see . . . well, I must have misunderstood."

Feeling suddenly depressed, she returned to her room, wondering if she shouldn't have stayed a prisoner at Amherst Hall.

The days passed. Juliette at first shunned the guests who came calling, pleading a headache, pretending to be out, but the loneliness became too much for her. She began to accept the invitations, and soon found herself caught up in the swirl of London nightlife. There were theaters to go to, elegant restaurants to dine at, gay parties to attend.

She never lacked for an escort these days, although she never considered taking any of them as a lover. Oh, some of them were charming and handsome, but Juliette had become convinced of an inability to respond to any of them even if she tried. Was she numb to the charms of all other men just because she could not have the one man she wanted? It was all so hopeless, and all she could do was pretend a gaiety which she did not feel while fending off their advances and blushing furiously over their scandalous suggestions. Oh, but these Englishmen were frightful! So smug and proper on the surface, so disgustingly lewd beneath it all.

One evening, for the first time in weeks, the Duke of

Amherst visited his wife's bedroom. He entered without knocking and found her at her dressing table running a silver brush through her long dark hair. Spying his reflection in the mirror as he came up behind her, she turned to face him, surprised at his appearance. Without a word, he removed the brush from her hand, turned her back around by the shoulders and began to brush her hair with slow, rhythmic strokes. A small smile touched his lips. He'd almost forgotten how silky soft her hair was.

Juliette stiffened at his touch. "Trevor, you should not have come."

"Not come? To my wife's bedroom? You have just recently accused me of neglecting you shamelessly, my dear, or don't you recall? Perhaps you have been to too many parties to remember."

Squirming away, she rose and turned to stare into the vacuum that was his eyes.

"You really do have quite a perfect body," he said, studying her. "So slender and supple. I am sure every man who sees you must desire you."

Why did he speak as though he held himself apart from the others and was not subject to the same desires that drove all men? Juliette wondered despairingly whether, just once in his life, he had ever felt the kind of desire he appeared to despise so thoroughly in other men. In the end it did not matter what she thought, when he led her to the bed and made love to her.

His movements were mechanical, as though rehearsed. Instead of the usual fumbling, drunken embraces, tonight his sobriety was the cause of her revulsion, and she found herself feigning the responses he seemed determined to obtain from her—quickly, so they could both get it over with. His kisses were cold, but they were real. His touch was like ice, but she sensed it stemmed from a genuine desire. And this evening, though briefly, he managed to enter her and consummate their union.

When he was finished, he rose and dressed quickly,

while Juliette slipped back into her nightdress. Why had he even bothered to remove it from her when he did not care to look at the body he called perfect?

Tonight, rather than leave immediately as he usually did, he strolled to her dressing table and toyed with the articles on it, in an absentminded sort of way, nudging them about with the tips of his fingers.

"You can no longer accuse me of shirking my duty," he said triumphantly.

Tying the belt of her dressing gown, Juliette approached him. "Trevor, it's late and I'm very tired. If you don't mind, I'd like to go to sleep now."

Ignoring her obvious annoyance, he said, "In a moment." At last, when he was ready, he turned his dark gaze on her. "I have invited a guest for tomorrow evening. I presume you will do your usually splendid job of looking your best?"

She turned away, a bored look on her face. "Anyone I know?"

"Yes. Lord Jeremy Tremain. You do remember him, don't you? He called on us at Amherst. He admires you a great deal, you know. As a matter of fact, for days he could speak of nothing but you." He chuckled under his breath. "If I were not such an understanding husband, his attentions could well arouse my jealous nature. But I understand you, Juliette, and your uncontrollable urge to flirt shamelessly with every man you meet. How could I take offense at another man responding to such silliness?"

"How indeed!" Juliette retorted. She knew it was not "understanding" but indifference that curbed his jealousy. He cared not how many men lusted after her. But why was he speaking about this particular man? Yes, she remembered Lord Tremain, and she had to admit that she *had* flirted with the man, but only because she had been so bored and the young English lord had paid her such obvious attention. In no time her old flirtatious nature had come rising to the surface. Though she had played him along, she had stopped before anything got out of hand. Her protests had only

ignited his determination. What could have been a nasty little scene was avoided by the unexpected intrusion of the butler. Juliette recoiled now at the memory of Tremain's leering eyes and the quick pinches she'd barely escaped.

"I suggested to Jeremy that he arrive at nine. I don't think I need remind you, Juliette, that he is a very important and influential man—one not to be denied a small favor here and there. You *do* understand how these things work, and you will be sweet to him, won't you? No temper tantrums? No emotional outbursts such as we had with Sir Royston?"

Oh, how she hated being spoken to as if she were a naughty child! "He pinched me beneath the table!" she exclaimed angrily. "He deserved the slap I gave him!"

"It was only a pinch, my dear. What is that when so much more is at stake?" He placed a finger under her chin, turned her face toward his. "Now, aren't I an understanding husband?"

Juliette pulled away. "What are you suggesting?" Her mind slid back suddenly over the words he'd used . . . small favors. Her eyes grew wide and bright. "My God, you must be insane! I won't do it, Trevor! I won't perform your 'small favors' for you! How dare you even suggest such a thing to me . . . your wife!"

"A technicality," he replied icily. For a moment his eyes locked with hers. Turning away, he walked to the door. "You are much too rebellious, Juliette. In time you will see that my wishes are not to be denied."

At the door he turned back, appraising her with a cool smile as she stood in the center of the room, her fists clenched white at her sides in frustrated fury, her emerald green eyes blazing hatred at him.

"You will receive Lord Tremain for dinner at nine. Afterwards, you may amuse him however you wish. I have some business that should keep me occupied until late, so I will take my dinner out."

Her mouth dropped open. "You mean, you will not even be present to witness this little farce? You're leaving me alone with him?"

Trevor sighed impatiently. "Jeremy is hardly a barbarian. And no, I will not be here. I think it would be quite inappropriate." He bid her good night with a brief, uncharacteristic kiss on her lips and left.

Lord Jeremy Tremain arrived punctually at nine, looking no different than he had the last time they had met. He still apparently loved to clothe his slightly bulging body in rich velvet coats, such an obvious insult to fine tailoring, thought Juliette. He still fancied an abundance of gold and jewel-studded rings on his pudgy fingers. The white wig he wore only made him look more absurd and added years to his demeanor.

Under all that overweight pomp was a fairly young man—Juliette guessed no more than thirty-two—whose body had fallen into decay at an early age from a life of indolence. In Lord Jeremy's case, it had turned a moderately good-looking man into an ineffectual fop.

They dined sumptuously on pheasant under glass, topping the meal off with plum pudding. The table was magnificently set with gold-trimmed china glittering under two elaborate candelabras. For a while, Juliette was able to lose herself in the small talk. Don't think about it, she told herself. Drink more champagne. Peering up through her dark lashes she smiled demurely at his compliments and laughed appropriately at his attempts at humor. The trivial chatter continued through dinner and many glasses of champagne. When she felt she could not endure his company a minute longer, Juliette rose from her seat.

"That book you mentioned earlier," she said, "I believe my husband has it in his library. I'll get it for you." She had no idea whether it was among the other leather-bound volumes on the shelves or not, she just had to get away from him for a few moments.

The library was dark, and she crossed the room quickly to light the lamp, her satin slippers sinking into the deep pile of the Persian carpet. As she bent to light the lamp, she felt a hand at her arm. Dear God! He had followed her! Before she could utter a sound, she was

pulled up against his chest. The pressure of his body against her slender thighs was all the evidence she needed as to what was on his mind. Suddenly, all polite small talk came to an abrupt end.

His diamond studded stickpin scratched her as she tried to squirm away. He only held her tighter.

"Come now, my little beauty," he said, his hot breath fanning her cheek. "You must know I have wanted you from the start. There is no need to play hard to get now that we are alone." His soft, white hands pressed against her back, drawing her closer still, as he pushed his hips firmly against hers.

Juliette tried to pull away, but her head was swimming. The awful combination of too much champagne and the sour smell of wine and tobacco on his breath made her feel faint.

"Please," she protested, "please, I have such a splitting headache. I must go to my room now. It's been pleasant, but really, you must go."

With a strength that surprised her, she tore away from him and fled from the room. Only now was she beginning to realize just how much champagne she had consumed, for she was barely able to hold her skirts up to keep from stumbling over them. Her vision was so blurred she could scarcely get to her room without clinging to the walls. Somehow, she managed to find her way, but then, dear God! Lord Jeremy was already there waiting for her!

"What is the hurry, my French beauty?" he said, catching her by the wrist and pulling her close again, this time smothering her mouth with his.

Cold waves of nausea washed over her, making her legs go weak. Involuntarily she leaned against him for the support she needed to remain on her feet. Forcing her through the door, he kicked it shut behind them, then released her.

"That is a lovely gown, but I much prefer to see you without it. Shall I undress you myself? I've been wanting to do that since I met you, you know. Never had a French woman before. Should be fun."

Juliette backed away, her arms instinctively crossing over her breasts.

"No use to pretend you're shy. Come along now. It's all been arranged, in case you're worrying about what *he'll* think."

"Stop!" Juliette burst out, startled by the sound of her own voice. "Don't touch me! Leave this house this instant!"

The smile left his face. "He told me you would offer some resistance. But now that you have sufficiently aroused my passions, I intend to get on with it." Without warning, he lunged for her.

Juliette managed to spring away, but gasped sharply at the sound of ripping fabric as her gown's delicate threads tore beneath his hand, baring more of her flesh than she wanted him to see. He gave a greedy chuckle and snatched at her gown again. This time the front of it ripped away.

With a cry, Juliette flung her hands up to her bare breasts and backed away until she reached the wall and had no place else to go. Sensing his quarry was trapped, Lord Jeremy came for her, pressing his wet lips heavily against hers, hands pawing at her naked breasts, pinching her nipples. Suddenly, he was transformed from an effeminate fop into a beast, hot and panting like all lust-driven animals.

Juliette was suddenly filled with a consuming rage and her mind spun wildly with loathing. With every bit of strength she could summon, she put both hands against his chest and shoved him away violently. He stumbled backward, the surprise stunning him momentarily, giving her a chance to dart past him. Flinging the door open, she raced down the corridor, stumbling over her skirts. If only she could get out of the house! Oh God, she *had* to! A frantic look over her shoulder as she ran wrenched a scream from her throat. Lord Jeremy was practically upon her, his lust fired to madness. His eyes were wide and glassy, his lips held a terrifying smile, and avid, greedy sounds came from

deep in his throat. With a burst of speed he lunged, throwing his entire body into the motion.

Juliette shut her eyes tightly and screamed. With a grunt, half of shock, half of fear, Lord Jeremy lost his footing and toppled down the curved staircase, his plump little body hitting the wall as it bounced like a ball down the stairs.

Oh God! Juliette thought, watching him somersault and then come to a halt on the floor. He lay motionless.

Oh my God, he's dead! Paralyzed, she could neither turn to flee, nor go to him to see. Then his arm moved and he tried to raise his head. He was alive! Driven by blind panic, she whirled and raced to the safety of her bedroom, locking the door behind her so that nobody could get in. *Nobody!*

Shock and terror made it impossible for her to think rationally. Forced into instant sobriety she paced the room nervously, wringing her hands until the skin was chafed. In her unreasonable fear, she had begun to imagine all sorts of things. Against her will, her mind recalled a smiliar scene. Then, too, her seduction had been planned beforehand, but in place of Lord Jeremy's leering face she saw the self-satisfied one of Comte Hugo Remy. In place of Trevor Kenmare's calculated cunning, it was René du Montier's deception that had betrayed her.

She tiptoed to the door, straining to hear any sound from below. Was Tremain still there? Was he still alive?

In the breathless hush of the night all she could hear was the wild thumping of her own heart as she stood defenseless against the memories that came to haunt her.

Chapter 19

London that winter of 1779 was a drab and lifeless place. The constant drizzle that hovered above the smoking chimneys produced a chilling effect, one not easily chased from the bones unless the heavy brocade drapes were tightly drawn and the fire was alive with flame.

The news that filtered into the city each day did little to alleviate the mood. Everywhere was heard talk of the war in the American colonies. There did not seem to be a family which was not, in one way or another, affected by the war raging across the Atlantic. Even the Kenmares had to contend with the nasty business of war.

With France assuming a growing role in the conflict it was no wonder that Juliette found herself snubbed at Garroway's Coffeehouse. It bothered her little; if anything, she found it amusing. What was shocking, however, and which did upset her was the news that arrived on February 26th. Privateers had captured the *L'Indien*, a 900-ton merchantman built for the East Indies trade—a Black Star vessel. Her crew and captain had been escorted to Nantes and deposited ashore. The ship, however, was not sold to the highest bidder, nor was her cargo offered for sale. Instead she had been sent to the bottom of the sea. On March 23rd the frigate, *Fortunée*, was sent to a watery grave. Another stroke of bad luck for the Black Star Line.

At a time when the seas were heavily fortified with the armed war ships of a score of nations, it was

reasonable to assume that the ill-fated Black Star ships had been innocent victims of international crossfire. But Trevor Kenmare knew better. When he heard the report from Capitain de Cottineau, the *Fortunée's* able commander, of the blue-eyed devil who had sent his ship to the bottom, Trevor knew the significance of the deplorable action.

"Consider them casualties of the war," Lord Anthony Holland suggested to the Duke one afternoon.

"Casualties, indeed!" countered Trevor. "You would not consider the matter so lightly if they had been English ships!"

"But your Grace, every day we hear of English ships meeting the same fate," Holland pointed out, "and their captains and crews are not so fortunate to receive an escort back home."

It was true. By now it was generally known that the French were assembling a large fleet for a joint operation with the Spanish to invade England. As a diversion, the rebel privateer, John Paul Jones, was sent voyaging around the British Isles and back to Texel in Holland, making an alarming nuisance of himself by attacking British commerce whenever he could. That was often and the results were devastating. A brigantine carrying provisions to London from Liverpool was taken and sent off to Lorient with a prize crew; a brig captured west of Ireland met the same fate. It was becoming a common story.

Juliette wept when she heard the news of the Black Star ships. What barbarian would want to see those beautiful, graceful sailing ships devastated? She did not know, as her husband did, the truth of the matter, but she suspected that it was not the haphazard bad luck of war. There appeared to be too much of a pattern, too much cunning in the destruction of those ships. But why? Who could know that those ships, sailing under the French flag, actually now belonged to an Englishman? Had not measures been taken to keep the transfer of ownership a secret? And why would any rebel privateer destroy French ships when all the

colonists had to depend on, besides their own courage, was the military generosity of France? A casualty of war? She could not believe it.

As spring approached and the days grew progressively warmer, Juliette's spirits gradually mended. Although the incident with Lord Jeremy Tremain was branded on her heart along with the other betrayals, she was too much a creature of life to dwell on such things. Tremain survived the escapade though he never called at Rampart Row again. Trevor, true to his nature, never revealed what passed between him and Lord Jeremy as a result of her refusal to submit to the man.

Every shock she suffered, every injury to her pride, only fortified her. They could take anything and everything from her, she vowed, but they would never come close to the memory that made her life worth living. Not even Trevor's callous indifference could disturb the image she carried in her mind. A thousand lurid advances from men like Lord Jeremy Tremain would never erase the fiery touch she still carried on her flesh, the look of desire she still saw in a pair of bright blue eyes.

She thought of him far too often, finding his face in front of her at odd moments when she least expected it; hearing his voice so close to her ear.

It infuriated her to think that while she dwelled so miserably on thoughts of him, he was probably stroking the sun-bronzed skin of some South Seas woman without a thought in his head, or a feeling in his heathen heart, for her.

Chapter 20

"A pot of porter, me lad?"

The tavern master smiled, showing rotted teeth, at the young man who sat at the bar in gloomy silence. A nod and the crusty old proprietor of the dockside tavern slid a tankard of dark-brown ale across to him.

Christian Youngblood stared morosely into the tankard. Leave it to Ryan, that bastard, to set up the meeting in a place like this! His gaze flicked over the walls of the dingy pothouse, one of many lining the docks of Statia's harbor. No better, no worse than any of the nameless others, except that its proprietor was another member of Judson Ryan's handpicked force.

As ordered, Christian had reported for the meeting only to find the man late by days. In his place a message waited warning Christian to stay put. So it was with great reluctance that he'd taken up temporary residence in the back room of the alehouse. Through the thin walls he could hear the sounds of men drinking in the front room until all hours of the night. He had been waiting in this miserable hell-hole now four days; the bed, board and a constant supply of rum and ale offered by the tavern master of whom Ryan had said simply, "You can trust him."

It was the evening of the fourth day and still no sign of Ryan. Christian finished his ale, nodded to the proprietor and left to return to his room. Here he stretched out on the cot, staring up at the midnight sky through the window above his head. The night was

warm with not even a hint of a breeze to rustle the palms.

The door opened suddenly and Judson Ryan walked in. Christian's pulse quickened, but he made no move to get up. He watched from the corner of his eye as Ryan placed his leather case on the table and sat down before it.

"You weren't in Paris to receive my last communiqué," he chided Christian.

The days of endless waiting had put Christian Youngblood's nerves on edge and his anger was quick to surface. "Tell that to the Goddamned storm that blew us one hundred and fifty miles off course! Better still, tell it to my First Mate who's down with the scurvy. Jesus Christ, if I'd had the time to pick up the cargo of limes and berries I needed to keep my crew healthy, it wouldn't have happened! Instead, I had to set full sail to meet you here, and you weren't even on time!"

He rose from the cot and stomped over to the table. Leaning over, he glared into the other man's expressionless face.

"I'll tell you something, Ryan. Years ago I agreed to do your bidding in return for my life. But I figure I've paid for that many times over, especially considering that my life sure as hell wasn't worth very much at the time. Now I do my own bidding. I go along with your plans only because they fall in with my own. I follow your orders only because I choose to. Do I make myself clear?"

Judson Ryan gave him a mirthless smile. "Of course . . . you always do whenever we meet." He began to shuffle through his papers. "By now I'm used to your tirades, Christian. Now, sit down, please . . . I've got some business to discuss."

Christian resented Ryan's tone but he obeyed, his curiosity, as always in these meetings, greater than his anger. Pulling out a chair, he swung it around with its back to the table and sat down straddling it. "It must be pretty important to bring you all the way to Statia. I

thought you never ventured too far from the comforts of Boston. Tell me, do you still frequent the prisons looking for recruits?"

With an impatient sigh, Ryan let the jibe go by without comment. "It is important," he replied. "When did you last see Stephan d'Ajasson?"

"Months ago . . . why?"

Ryan did not answer directly. "Did he say where he was going?"

Christian thought back to his last conversation with the Frenchman. It had been aboard the *Rebel* when Stephan had spoken of his plans to join Lafayette. He repeated this to Ryan, and saw the man's usually blank expression take on a sour look.

"What is it?" Christian demanded. "Does that blasted look on your face mean that Stephan hasn't been fighting with Lafayette all this time?"

Ryan shot him an unreadable glance. "No he has not. General Lafayette hasn't seen him . . . nor has Washington. He hasn't reported to Franklin in Paris, either."

Lighting a cigar, Christian studied Ryan across the flame. "When was the last communication you received from him?"

Ryan groped through his papers and selected one. "Here it is . . . it's in code. Took me hours to decipher it, what with that Godawful handwriting of his. Pretty much routine stuff here. Oh yes, he also mentions the waves breaking against the rocks and the view from the end of the land, or something to that effect. You know what he can do to the English language at times."

The legs of Christian's chair slapped the floor with an angry thud that brought Ryan's head up. "The 'end of the land'?" Christian demanded.

Ryan nodded.

"Land's End." He paused, then added, "Cornwall . . ."

This time Judson Ryan lost his composure. "England!" he exploded. "What the hell is he doing in England!"

"That's what I'd like to know," came the tight-lipped reply.

Christian recalled now, with regret, the message he had passed on to Stephan revealing the details of his visit to Cornwall and his shocking discovery at Amherst. Slowly, regret turned to vague suspicion and then to anger when it became all too clear why Stephan d'Ajasson had risked a perilous journey to England . . . all too evident what magnet drew him to Amherst.

It was the same overpowering force that drove Christian Youngblood these days, indeed, had him obsessed. It was the vision of a beautiful dark-haired, green-eyed woman. The realization that Stephan had gone to Cornwall to see Juliette filled Christian with rage. At the same time a more rational part of his brain asked: "Can you blame him?"

Could he blame Stephan for being powerless to resist her? Damn it, now was no time for understanding! That blasted Frenchman had gone to Amherst . . . using his charm, no doubt, to win Juliette into his bed. Juliette . . .

At times the name brushed his mind like a feather, at other times it resounded like a bell. She was so many things to him . . . she was a sultry siren, an enchanter of men, whose honeyed voice and breathless whispers lured them to their doom. . . . Yes, she was like some mythical siren, luring him on, inciting him to irrational anger just because another man also found her intoxicating . . . another man who was his friend, caught up in the same spell.

He'd long since given up trying to deny the fact that he desired her as he had no other woman. That slender body that drove him to mindless lust . . . those emerald eyes, turned up at the corners, giving her a look of smoldering defiance. She was the kind of woman no man could truly possess, no matter how tightly he held her in his arms or how deeply he imbedded himself in her. She would always be just a fingertip's reach away.

In disgust, he wondered how she could ever be happy married to a man like Trevor, who could give her

nothing but money and a title. Was he also supplying her with a steady stream of lovers? And what of her spirit and fire? Amherst Hall was no place for her! She needed space to grow; she needed freedom the way he needed it. They were alike . . . too much alike for Christian to forget her.

But Christian knew, all too well, that what Trevor Kenmare lacked in charm and personal appeal a man like the Marquis d'Ajasson more than made up for. Wealth, title, a magnificent home in her native country, a passionate lover, she could have all those things in Stephan.

And no doubt the Frenchman was in Cornwall at this very moment using it all to his best advantage.

Chapter 21

As though urgently needed elsewhere, winter picked itself up one day and withdrew. But the emergence of spring and its blossoms only complicated matters for Juliette. For weeks she had felt as if a volcano were bubbling inside her, about to explode at any time. Through sheer force of will she kept it under control, the only hint of it in the glint in her green eyes and the flush in her cheeks.

She took a morbid delight these days in challenging her husband's authority. She came and went as she pleased, daring him to forbid her to do so. She challenged every statement he made, defied every demand. She would have gotten down into the dirt and fought him hand to hand if she could have believed that it would arouse some human emotion in the man. But her behavior made him even colder, if that was possible, more withdrawn.

His inattentiveness only stoked the fires that burned in her. His unresponsiveness only magnified her longing for fulfillment until it was almost too much for her to bear. Other men recognized it and responded. Among themselves they called her the French gypsy and laughed knowingly. Her emotional outbursts excited them. Her lack of interest in what the world thought of her made her a challenge. The obvious lack of restraint on her by the Duke intrigued them, and the sheer dazzle of her beauty made her one of the most talked-about women in England.

It did little, however, to make Juliette happy. She

looked forward to the coming of spring when she could leave the pompous society and black soot of London and return to the green meadows and woods of the country.

She arrived back at Amherst when the thickets were abloom with primroses and violets and the woods were covered with a dense blanket of bluebells. The Hall's myriad windows were open to the warm sun, the hallway vases filled with spring blossoms.

But the serenity she'd hoped to find in the English countryside never materialized. No sooner had she arrived at Amherst Hall, when Martha Ruddy thrust a white envelope into her gloved hand, explaining, "It's from your cousin. I promised I'd give it to you the minute you walked in."

Juliette wrinkled her nose at the odor of gin that came from Martha. Thanking her politely, she took the envelope and went to her room. There she tore the envelope open, suppressing a cry of surprise when she saw the seal, melted in wax. It was the house of d'Ajasson.

She scanned the hastily scrawled words Stephan d'Ajasson had written some days before, requesting that she meet him privately on the fourteenth. Why, that was tomorrow! She bit her lip. Stephan . . . in England? England was a dangerous place for a Frenchman to be; he was taking an awful risk!

He would be waiting at the church at Garden Reach in Chiltingham. She knew the place . . . it was perhaps an hour's ride from Amherst Hall. She even knew a shortcut through the woods, a little path that Seth had shown her.

The groom had a horse saddled for her early the next morning. She rode with the sun's early morning warmth on her cheeks, pausing for a few minutes by a lake in the forest. The water was like a mirror, reflecting the lush green of the English countryside. Across its looking-glass face skimmed the sparkling reflections of the early sun. Overhead, the cloudless sky was a vibrant blue.

The small churchyard was silent except for the birds singing unseen, and deserted except for the gravestones jutting out of the earth, bleached white by the sun and worn smooth by the constant wind. She dismounted and loosely secured her horse's reins around the trunk of an old sycamore. Stepping lightly over ground overgrown with thickets of time, she made her way to the thatch-roofed dwelling. Once a parish house of worship, it now stood in crumbling and forgotten neglect.

A strange sense of loneliness crept over her. Despite the peaceful and poetic loveliness of the place, she felt its desolation. The interior of the church was dark except for a single shaft of hazy yellow sunlight filtering through a time-eroded patch in the roof. Crudely built wooden pews were in disarray, some lying on their sides as though a massive hand had picked them up and scattered them about.

The place gave her goosebumps. Deciding to leave the resident ghosts undisturbed, she gathered up her skirts and turned to leave. Something stopped her in her tracks . . . something so terrifying it froze the scream in her throat.

A towering dark silhouette filled the church doorway. Overcome with terror, Juliette watched speechless as it moved slowly toward her, passing from bright sunlight into the darkness of the church, a ghostly image bent on evil. She backed away slowly until she felt something hard at her back and knew she could go no farther. She wanted to scream but could not. The figure advanced menacingly. With a gulping sob she drew in her breath to scream, but a hand reached out swiftly and covered her mouth. She began to struggle then, instinctively, trying to scream and choking for breath.

"Mademoiselle . . . Mademoiselle Juliette!" The harsh whisper brought her back to her senses. It was Stephan d'Ajasson.

He looked down at her guiltily, as shaken as she was.

"Please!" he said. "Please, I am so sorry! I did not mean to frighten you. Please Mademoiselle, you must believe me! I am so sorry . . . please do not hate me for it!"

Juliette stared up at him, face flushed, body still trembling. "Stephan . . ." she managed to breathe. "I thought . . . Oh God, I thought . . ."

"Oh *non, non*," he said quickly, grasping her hand and squeezing it in his big palm. "I did not mean to hurt you, but I did not want you to scream."

Juliette blushed, suddenly ashamed at having panicked so unreasonably. "It's this place," she said weakly, "There's something . . . unsettling about it."

Stephan's gray eyes flicked quickly over the graveyard. "*Oui*, I feel it too. I was wrong to suggest that we meet here. Come, I know another place not far from here where we can talk."

With gentle but firm pressure he took her by the arm and led her to the tree where both of their horses now waited patiently. Placing two strong hands around her waist, nearly encircling it with his massive grasp, he hoisted her effortlessly into the saddle, then mounted his animal quickly and led the way from the churchyard. They rode in silence for ten minutes or so, each using the time to evaluate what they recalled about the other.

He's so much bigger than I remembered, Juliette thought. Though she dared not look at the man riding wordlessly beside her, she could feel his massive presence, scent the odor of the perspiration that stained his shirt. She recalled a man who had been kind to her at a time when she had been confused and angry and hurt. When Christian Youngblood's cruel and heartless manner had sent her emotions spiraling into despair and her mind into fear, Stephan d'Ajasson had been there to calm her. The boyish smile, the handsome face, the gentle gray eyes . . . even when she could read in those eyes certain thoughts concerning herself, she had not feared him. No, she told herself now as she

rode beside him, her leg almost touching his, she could never fear a man like Stephan.

The Frenchman watched her from the corner of his eye, smiling to himself at the way she kept her eyes demurely cast down, the thick black lashes fanning across her flushed cheeks. No, he had not forgotten how lovely she was, but he had underestimated the impact of it. Seeing her again after so many months made him realize how foolish he had been to think her less than absolutely perfect. *Dieu!* She was magnificent! She was a ravishing creature whose silken complexion and delicate bones contrasted so startlingly . . . so mysteriously . . . with the earthy wild spirit blazing defiantly in her emerald eyes. She was the most intriguing and perplexing creature he had ever known, and she filled his senses to overflowing.

On sheer impulse, he brought his horse to a halt, jumped down and strode over to her stallion. Claspings both hands about her waist, he pulled her down to the ground, holding her for a moment. Green eyes flashed up at him, a mixture of alarm and anticipation in their emerald depths.

Reading his thoughts, she closed her eyes in anguish. "Stephan . . ." she began weakly, "Stephan, please don't . . ."

But his voice, choked with emotion, silenced her. "*Chérie,*" he whispered, just as he covered her mouth with his.

His hands went around her back, pulling her up against his powerful body. Bending her over backward, he held her trapped in his massive embrace, unable to move. His lips were firm and they pressed against hers with a gentle determination. Shudders rippled through Juliette's body when he pushed his tongue between her parted lips. A strange, tingling sensation in her loins was working its way up to her heart, setting it beating wildly. Truly it seemed as though her body had taken control of her good sense, yielding shamelessly to his caresses. With a will of their own, her fingers inched up

to his neck where they tangled themselves in the long blond curls that hung over his collar.

For a fleeting instant, the world ceased to exist. She had ceased thinking and became a creature of feeling whose only sense seemed to be that of touch. Leaning pliantly against him, she responded to his kiss with her lips, her fingers, and her slim hips that were molded to his. Then a sound, that of her own soft moan, suddenly turned her rigid in his arms, dispelling the moment of passion like a puff of smoke. Pulling her lips from his, she moved her head sharply from side to side to avoid his demanding mouth and tried to push him away.

He released her and then stepped back, a grin on his face. A surge of blood rushed to her cheeks. It had happened so quickly that her lips were still parted from his kiss and her chest heaved, small firm breasts straining against the fabric of her riding habit. The brief moment of passion had ignited the fires banked inside her and their flames still danced in her eyes, turning them wickedly bright.

Stephan stretched out his arm to her, but she sprang away, seeking to regain a bit of the composure his kiss had robbed her of. "You . . . you should not have done that."

"You did not seem to mind it," he said, grinning.

Juliette gave him an angry look. "Well, I did!"

The smile faded from his lips, though its gleam was still visible in his eyes. "Perhaps it is too soon, eh? I will not force you to do anything you do not wish to do, but you must tell me—it was good for you, too, was it not?"

She looked down at the ground, embarrassed yet compelled to answer. "Yes," she whispered, unable to look at him, "it was good."

She turned away quickly so that he could not read in her eyes the shame she felt for being such a slave to her body's demands. Neither could she let him see the disappointment.

Only one other man in her life had the power to do that to her but with twice as much force . . . ten times

the power and magic to send her senses reeling, her passions soaring. As long as he alone had taken her to such heights, it truly seemed that no other man could ever matter. Not even this charming and extremely desirable Frenchman.

They were such opposites, the French marquis and the rebel privateer captain, yet they were friends. Between them Juliette's emotions raced back and forth, throwing her into a vortex of confusion where hate turned into love, fondness into desire, safety into danger, and mere feeling into passion.

Stephan's voice drew her away from her thoughts. "*Ma petite*, we talk now, *oui*?" He gestured toward the ground. When she was seated on the soft green grass, he dropped down beside her, legs outstretched, leaning back on his elbows.

She asked tremulously, "How did you find me?"

He plucked a blade of grass and touched it to his lips. "When at last I return to my home in Vilaine, I find a message from *mon Capitaine*. In it he tells me of his visit to England . . . to Amherst."

Trying to sound casual, she said, "Oh . . . and have you seen Captain Youngblood?"

He shook his head. "Not for a long time now. But the message it was dated some time ago. That means by now he is in Statia where I will go after I leave here. So, I will see him soon. Why? Do you wish me to tell him something?"

"No, no nothing," she replied quickly. "You haven't told me yet why you've come," she said, changing the subject. "If it were discovered you, a Frenchman, fighting for the Americans, are here—"

He put up a hand to silence her. "What could they do? Arrest me for coming to see my 'cousin'?" He winked and smiled. "I come because there is something in the message that is not written. I can feel his anger between the words, and I come to find out what happened to make him so."

Juliette was indignant. "He is angry! I should be the

one who is angry, and I am! How dare he come here to play games with me, to trifle with my affections and somehow neglect to tell me he murdered my father!"

Stephan whistled softly. "Do not take offense that I say it, but your father, *chérie*, he was not a good man. There were many things he did that were not very nice. He killed a man named James Youngblood and that made Christian very angry."

"Angry enough to kill him in return!" she replied.

"*Oui*, it is true. But he is a very emotional man, as you know. Sometimes he sees only the right and the wrong . . . nothing in the middle. To him it was the right thing to do. I tell you the story of how it happened . . . if you want to hear?"

She nodded and he went on. "They met by accident in St. Martin. *Le Capitaine* would have let him go with just a warning not to show his face on that side of the Atlantic, but your father, *chérie*, he was a foolish man. He drew his sword and challenged him. What else could be done? In such a fight only one man can live. Your father was a good swordsman, but he was no match for *mon Capitaine*. Perhaps he had not heard of Christian Youngblood's reputation with the sword." He shrugged his powerful shoulders. "Does that sound like cold-blooded murder to you?" Her silence prompted him to add, "Perhaps you judge him too harshly. You know only one side of the man . . . I know many."

They fell into an uncomfortable silence. Stephan knew that any further mention of Christian Youngblood would only aggravate an already tense situation. It was time to get the answers to some of his questions. Just as it was his habit to burst unannounced into a room, it was also a part of his disarming character to ask whatever was on his mind . . . without ceremony.

"Tell me, you do not seem the kind of woman who is . . . how you say? . . . bullied into something. Yet you marry a man you cannot be happy with. It makes me wonder." He had learned that much from Christian's message.

Juliette was quick to react. "Good Lord, do you think I *wanted* to marry him? I had to . . . there was no choice!"

"No choice? You were free to return to France, were you not?" he asked.

"Yes, but . . . oh, you don't understand!"

"I am trying," he said patiently. "But you leave too many holes in this explanation. Maybe you tell me the truth, eh?"

Juliette looked into his soft gray eyes and sighed, reluctant to bring up unpleasant memories. "Lord Alfred, my husband's uncle, said that if I did not marry Trevor, he . . . he . . . he would have Christian thrown into prison." She shook her head. "I don't know what he has against him, why he would want to harm an innocent man. I cannot believe that my marriage to Trevor was of such importance to him. It's all so mysterious that I . . ."

She stopped at the strange expression on his face. "What is it? Is there something you know that you're not telling me?"

Stephan stared past her a moment. He inhaled deeply, then, expelling a long breath of air, said, "There are many things you could call Christian Youngblood but innocent is not one of them." A quick glance into her searching eyes told him he could not leave it there. "For longer than I know him the name he uses is Youngblood. But his real name is . . . Kenmare."

Juliette gasped. "A relation of my husband's? A cousin?"

He plucked at the grass nervously, avoiding her eyes. "A brother."

The revelation was like a hard slap in the face. The sheer absurdity of it left her speechless for a moment. When she did speak, she could barely get the words out. "You mean . . . you mean . . . Christian is the brother of the Duke of Amherst?"

Stephan swallowed hard. "*Non, ma petite*, Christian is the Duke of Amherst."

The shock numbed her. It took some time before the irony of it sank in.

"*Chérie*," Stephan was saying, placing his hand gently on her shoulder, "perhaps it would be best for you to come away from this place. There are too many dark things about this house that you cannot know . . ."

She startled him by jumping to her feet. "No!" she stormed, green eyes blazing down at him, "I'll not leave! I have been moved from one square to another as though I were a pawn in someone's chess game, and I'll not leave until I find out exactly what is going on!"

He rose and went to her. "I can see you will not listen to reason, but you must promise me that you will be careful." Pressing a folded slip of paper into her palm, he said, "Here, I give you this. If ever you have need of me you will get in touch with this man."

He waited until her fingers closed over the paper before taking her hand and leading her back to where their horses waited. As she reached for her reins, he spun her quickly around, pulling her once again into his embrace.

"*Chérie*," he whispered, "I will wait until you are ready to give yourself to me, but this thing I do take."

His lips covered hers, harshly this time, kissing her fully without any gentleness. Then he released her and helped her into the saddle.

They rode back silently. At a fork in the road, Stephan pulled up his horse and turned in the saddle to look at her. "This is the way I must go."

"Please take care of yourself," Juliette said, nudging her horse close to his. "And do be careful in the woods, I've heard stories of highwaymen . . ."

Stephan laughed lustily and patted the sword hanging at his side. "I, too, am not bad with the sword. But you, *chérie*, you must stay on the main road where the highwaymen are not so bold to come, eh?"

His protectiveness was touching. She was almost tempted to forgive him for the kiss he had stolen.

"Goodbye, Stephan," she said.

"Non, ma petite," he replied, smiling, *"Au revoir."*

She recognized the carriage and matching pair of bays being led away to the stables as she reached Amherst Hall. Lord Alfred. She frowned. Now, what did he want?

Ever since her encounter with him in the study, their relationship had been limited to terse recognition, though occasionally Juliette had seen fit to put the man in his place with a fiery display of temper. For the most part, however, she had contrived a dreadful headache whenever he had visited Trevor at Rampart Row. All in all, she had seen little of him over the winter.

She found him now in the study, examining the mail that had accrued in his absence. He glanced up and saw her standing in the doorway.

"Juliette! What a pleasant surprise! I was hoping you would be down before long."

Ignoring the feigned cordiality, she said, "As a matter of fact, I've been up for hours. I went for an early ride."

"I was about to ring for tea. Would you join me?"

Her first impulse was to refuse. Instead, she answered, "Yes, it will give us a chance to talk."

Lord Alfred's curiosity was immediately aroused. "Talk? That is rather unlike you, isn't it, my dear?"

"Why your Lordship, whatever do you mean?" Juliette said in a honeyed voice.

All pretense fell like a ton of bricks. "We both know that my company appeals to you about as much as a bad headache," he retorted.

"What an interesting choice of words," she said. "Yes, you could compare it to a headache, particularly the variety my husband seems to suffer from."

He inhaled deeply, impatiently. "Juliette, I do not care to play games with you today. I'm sure you can find someone else to amuse you."

She strolled to the tall French windows and gazed out at the grounds. "Who would that be? My husband is always too busy."

"The Duke is a very busy man. He does not have time to cater to the foolish whims of a frivolous woman."

"Oh, without a doubt," she replied, "but I was referring to my husband . . . not the Duke."

Clairborne glanced up quickly. "Your riddles are a bit over my head."

She approached close enough to see his jaw muscles twitch involuntarily, proof that she had struck a sensitive nerve. "Try this riddle then. What happens when a young woman discovers that the man she married is not the man she thought she married?"

The letters dropped from Clairborne's hand. A look partly of surprise, partly of admiration showed in his face. "So, you have found out."

"Yes, and since it is now within my power to have my marriage annulled, it really should not matter if you tell me the truth. Let me put it to you this way . . . if you do not tell me the truth, I will have the marriage annulled. And, your Lordship, think of the scandal." She knew the possibility appalled him and pressed on. "I want to know why I was led to believe that Trevor was the Duke of Amherst. I want to know what his part is in this charade, and I want to know where Christian fits in."

They remained glaring at each other as the door opened and Martha Ruddy brought in a silver serving tray, then retreated quickly from the room without a word. Lord Alfred tore his eyes away from Juliette, walked to the table and filled his cup. He answered her in a voice devoid of expression:

"Our grandmother," he began, "The Dowager Duchess, threatened to disown Edmund if he married that chippy—that crude French actress he was so taken with. The old hag would have done it, too, but she died before she could make her wishes known to her solicitors. I tried to tell them that it was her wish that Edmund receive nothing—not the title, not Amherst Hall, not a bloody penny of the inheritance—but without having it in writing, there was nothing the fools

could do. So Edmund got it all and married that woman in the bargain."

He paused to consider the bitter irony of it. "It would have been mine. It *should* have been mine. I would never have tarnished it as he did with that absurd marriage. Then the awful scandal when Marie threw herself off a cliff." He grimaced in disgust. "Edmund, the blasted fool, took it all quite horribly. Aged him overnight. Made him a tired, old man. Surprised the hell out of me when he turned around the following year and married Margaret, that prig of a woman." The contempt showed in his voice, but he went on, as though thinking out loud:

"Then he had two sons, two obstacles for me." He stared down into his teacup and smiled. "Ah, but Fate was kinder to me after that, for she provided me with a way to get rid of one nephew, which I did when I arranged for Christian to be packed off to Jamaica. And, of course, by then it was obvious that Trevor would naturally get rid of himself."

He turned to her then, saying, "Both boys have a natural tendency toward destruction, have you noticed? Christian delights in destroying what belongs to others while Trevor relishes his own destruction. Young men like Trevor rarely live to see old age. I was content to sit back and wait for him to destroy himself, in one way or another."

Juliette listened mesmerized, fascinated by this horrifying glimpse into Lord Alfred's soul.

"When I learned that Christian was alive, I was furious at first. Then I began to think about the animosity that had always existed between him and Trevor, and I wondered what would happen if they met again under, shall we say, less than favorable circumstances? It was simply a matter of finding the right connection."

Juliette shuddered as she suddenly realized that *she* was that connection, that vital link in the inevitable destruction of both brothers.

"Clever, don't you agree?" Clairborne said, watch-

ing her. "I kept thinking, now what would Christian think of his own brother wedding the daughter of Michel Delacroix? Knowing Christian's feelings for your late father, it was safe to assume he would find the suggestion less than delightful. Of course, he would also be too proud to admit the real reason for his return to England, and so poor Trevor could only naturally assume it was to claim the title. At this point, Trevor would never relinquish it. There is no telling what he would do to keep it . . . perhaps even dispose of Christian." He shrugged. "Who knows? The possibilities are exciting."

Juliette could no longer keep silent. "My God! You're a monster!"

Lord Alfred turned stiffly to her. "The observation is pointless. It matters little what you think of me, only that you realize the importance of this matter to me."

Her mind still reeling from his confession, all she could say was: "Why? Why?"

Clairborne suddenly flushed scarlet. "Why?" he bellowed, coming to life. "Why? Because it belongs to *me*, that's why! Edmund did not deserve it! Trevor was never fit for it! And Christian never wanted it! It's mine, I tell you, *mine!*"

Juliette turned from him, sick with disgust. She had asked and now she knew. It was worse, far, far worse, than she ever could have imagined.

Chapter 22

The letter was waiting for her when she returned from a late summer's morning ride through the countryside. It was undated, unsigned, written in a childish scrawl on soiled paper. Obviously the work of a prankster, she thought at first, as she read the ugly accusations against her husband in misspelled words. It was not until a small object spilled from the envelope that she recognized the truth, no matter how illiterate the writer. A wave of nausea swept over her which she fought to suppress as she hastily made a fire and then stood back to wait until the flames were ravenous.

For a long time she watched the fire, thinking about this, her latest discovery. Was she surprised? In truth, not really. She had long suspected that Trevor's long hours away had little to do with business. Was she appalled? Only at her own misjudgment of him. All this time she had thought he had a mistress, perhaps more than one. She never, in her wildest imaginings, considered him capable of these charges leveled against him in the anonymous letter.

The writer had demanded money to keep silence about the perverse habits of one of England's most famous men. Juliette laughed scornfully. The fool, she thought, why not demand a sum worthy of such a fiendish crime, instead of the paltry one hundred pounds this blackmailer demanded? She found herself wondering who it was who would bring a man to his knees in the public eye for a mere hundred pounds.

"Well," she declared to herself, "I'll never know who

threatens to expose Trevor for what he is, for I've not the least intention of meeting those demands." How dare the weak, illiterate fool attempt to blackmail her husband through her! This was Trevor's problem, not hers! She cared not whether the eyes of England looked down upon Trevor Kenmare—she'd not be a party to blackmail! With that, she flung the crumpled letter into the hungry flames. As she clenched her fists in anger, the small object hidden in her hand bit sharply into her palm. Opening her fist slowly, Juliette gazed down on it . . . a small silver button, the one she'd noticed missing from Trevor's waistcoat last winter.

Some weeks later, sitting in the elegant drawing room of the townhouse on Rampart Row, Trevor inquired of his uncle, "Have you concluded the arrangements we spoke of?"

Clairborne nodded. "We have received official authority for Black Star vessels to sail to Izmir, load their cargoes and withdraw. They will even provide an escort until we are on our way."

"Is an escort really necessary?" asked Trevor. "Who but those scoundrel American rebels would molest French ships on the Mediterranean?"

"It's not the Americans," explained Clairborne. "It's the Turks themselves . . . a faction of malcontents. We do not expect much trouble from them, but the authorities seem to feel our venture worth the precaution."

Trevor snorted in contempt. "They should have a big enough share of the profits!"

"There was no way we could get around it," his uncle replied, touching a match to his cigar and coaxing smoke from it. "We British have taken a back seat with the Ottomans ever since the French became so dear to them. Considering that France now openly proclaims approval of independence for the American colonies, you can imagine the delicacy of our transaction. It became necessary to grease the most influential palms. Those, alas, are always the most expensive."

"Tell me then, Uncle, what is our new business venture to be?"

Lord Alfred replied in a dry, flat voice, "Olives."

"How clever!" Trevor laughed. "And I presume you have worked out the arrangements with the port authorities in Marseille to dispense of the incoming cargoes of . . . olives?"

"As I said, everything is arranged. A portion of the goods will be freighted overland, loaded onto small boats and taken across the channel to England."

A light ignited in Trevor's dark eyes. "Splendid! But why the long face? You should be pleased that you have succeeded so well. By going right to the source you no longer have to deal with those insidious creatures in Liverpool. You've been complaining to me for years about how shabbily they treat you." He yawned, adding, "You cannot expect much more from such low creatures."

"I am just wondering," said Clairborne hesitantly, "if this new arrangement may not present problems we have not anticipated."

Rising from his leather chair, Trevor sauntered by his uncle, his long slender body moving with rigid grace. "I know how fond you are of the comfortable life, Uncle Freddy," he said, a sarcastic edge to his voice, "can you afford to turn your nose up at it now that we sit on the verge of success?"

Clairborne lifted his lanky body out of the chair. "Your Grace, I'm certain you can understand how awkward this is for me to say, but . . . well, there is the matter of your wife . . ."

Sighing, Trevor turned away. "Ah yes, my little French icicle." He gave a short, derisive laugh.

"Surely she is bound to suspect something," Clairborne prompted. "She makes everything her business and she asks so many questions. She is a rather defiant girl, if you know what I mean. Not that that sort of thing does not have its place, but in matters such as this . . . it is my opinion that it is best that she know

nothing, not even enough to bring a question to her mind."

Trevor nodded. "Yes, she is a nosy little bitch, isn't she? If she were not so bloody beautiful, I'd be tempted to turn her out. As it is, I do rather enjoy having her around at times, something pleasant to look at amidst all the ugliness and perversity, don't you think?" Turning his dark eyes on Clairborne, he saw the startled look in Lord Alfred's eyes. "You're surprised at my choice of words, Uncle?" he asked, smiling with grim amusement. "It takes a man of guilt to recognize his sins in others you know."

The moment of rare self-inspection threw Lord Alfred off. How unlike his nephew to reveal a bit of his innermost self to scrutiny. Clairborne searched Trevor's face intently, seeking a clue to the strange behavior, but as usual nothing was written on the handsome face.

"I take it you have a plan?" Clairborne asked.

Trevor walked slowly back to his chair, a smile of satisfaction on his lips. "The Duchess will be going on a little holiday. When does the first vessel leave for Izmir?"

Clairborne's mouth dropped open. "You don't mean to send her there, do you?"

"Are you daft? Of course not. I am a trifle more clever than you give me credit for. Now listen carefully. You will instruct the ship's captain to sail first to Sardinia so that Her Grace can spend a few weeks at the family villa in Oristano."

"Perhaps she will not consent to go," Lord Alfred suggested.

"Little chance of that. Juliette is forever telling me in her usual grand display of heated emotion of how shabbily I treat her. I think she'll be only too glad to get away for a while. I have also contemplated sending for her Godmother. *That* should keep my wife occupied for a while, don't you agree?"

Mulling it over, Clairborne found but one objection

to Trevor's plan. "That le Roy woman," he said, "I remember her as charming and handsome but much too frivolous. There is no telling what foolish notions she would put into her niece's head."

"Juliette invents her own foolish notions," said Trevor. "She does not require them from others. But perhaps you are right . . . why invite trouble? Juliette shall go alone. Who can say that a few weeks in the sun will not calm her down a bit? I, for one, hope it does. Lately, she has been something of a shrew, and it has begun to try my patience."

"Well, she has never quite been what you would call conventional," commented Lord Alfred.

"No indeed," said Trevor, "for now we'll see her off to Sardinia, but upon her return we will see what we can do about taming that insolent little French gypsy."

Later, long after Lord Alfred had gone, Trevor sat alone far into the night, his mind filling rapidly with the schemes his uncle had devised . . . and a few of his own. Shortly before dawn, his head began to ache. By the time he reached his bedroom, his temples were pounding unmercifully. With trembling hands he emptied the packet of white powder into the waiting tonic sitting by his bed. All thoughts fled from him now but one . . . the pain, the awful, driving pain that seared through his brain like a lance.

Gradually the medicine began to take effect. Trevor lay on top of the bed covers, fully clothed, soaked with perspiration, his breathing shallow, eyes closed, oblivious now to all schemes . . . most of all those being plotted a long way off from England, on a tiny, tropical island in the middle of the Caribbean sea. . . .

Chapter 23

The mood in the small backroom was tense. In one straight-backed chair sat Stephan d'Ajasson, his muscular frame slouched, long legs stretched out in front of him, a look of exasperation on his face. The ruffled stock at his neck was hanging loose, the billowing sleeves of his shirt had been rolled up past his elbows, as though he'd been hard at work.

Time and time again he'd gone over it, repeated it, sworn on a stack of bibles and his own mother's grave, but Christian Youngblood refused to believe, driving the Frenchman into a mild rage.

"*Mon ami*, I tell you so many times that nothing happened!" Then his gray eyes narrowed into steel glints. "And if it did? What rights do you have to the woman?" Christian's tight-lipped silence brought Stephan forward in his seat. "Perhaps you are silent because you are ashamed of your own part in it, eh?"

For that remark he received a piercing glare from those china-blue eyes. "It is not me you should be angry with, but yourself," the Frenchman told him. "You should be cursing your own foolish pride. You have never claimed her as your woman, so why should not another man have her? Especially if the little one is unhappy with her marriage? I did not go there to seduce her, although I will admit it crossed my mind later. But the fact remains, she would not be in that sad marriage if another man—you—had done his duty."

Ignoring Christian's angry glance, he went on. "Her

father said only that she should marry the Duke of Amherst, not that it should be Trevor Kenmare. You could have stepped in, you know. You could have prevented that ridiculous marriage."

"Stepped in and what?" snapped Christian, coming to life. "Revealed myself to them—to the world? I've told you, you pigheaded Frenchman, I won't do that! It would serve no point at this stage to claim my title now."

"Perhaps," Stephan said, "it is not the world you wish to fool, my brash friend, but yourself."

"I don't know what you're talking about," complained Christian, his eyes dark with anger.

Brushing aside the warning sign of an approaching storm, Stephan blatantly challenged him: "Oh yes you do. You are afraid of what the world will think of a British duke who fights for the freedom of America. It is so unlike you to care what others think, so why do you care about this, eh?"

Christian Youngblood was obviously uncomfortable at having everything out in the open like this, preferring to keep it locked in the privacy of his mind where the thoughts wrecked havoc with his peace, but at least he did not have to look at them.

He began to fidget in his chair under Stephan's watchful gray eyes. "What would you have me do?" he asked. "March back into England and proclaim myself to be the long lost son of Edmund Kenmare? Surprise them all with the news that I am the eleventh Duke of Amherst, and not that pompous fool?"

"It would be a start. Under the circumstances, the marriage might be annulled and then you could marry her and—"

That was as far as he got before Christian's astonished voice stopped him. "What? Married? Me?" He began to pace the floor, his lean, muscular body moving with long, pantherlike strides. "I'm not the marrying kind, you know that. What sort of life could I offer a woman?"

A wry look crossed Stephan's fair face. "Is that it?"

he scoffed. "You cannot give a woman a proper life? Or is it that you do not wish to give up the reckless life of a priate with all the carousing and whoring to become what you really are underneath it all?" He shook his head. "This is Stephan, *mon ami*. We are together for too long to fool me. The first time I meet you so long ago, I say to myself, 'Stephan, this man is no common thief, no ordinary spy that Ryan has recruited. No, he is a gentleman, a nobleman, in spite of how hard he tries to hide it.' His voice dropped, softly he added, "I do not know why you run from it, Christian, but who knows, maybe you come to like the life of a nobleman. With such a beautiful Duchess, who would not like it, eh?"

Christian frowned at the playful wink Stephan gave him. "I've never been tied down before, Stephan. You know that, damn it! Besides, she hates me, and she's already married. What difference does it make now?"

"Ah, perhaps now it makes all the difference in the world."

"You know, you're sounding more like Ryan every day. Don't speak to me in riddles, Goddamnit! If you've got something to say, say it!"

Stephan rose and came forward. "All right," he said, "I will say it all. You think she married him for the ships because you are too stubborn to see beyond that. But I say you are wrong, and that she married him to save *you* from prison." In answer to the look of incredulous disbelief on Christian's face, he added, "It is true . . . she told me herself. How could she know that their threats are useless against you? She thought only of you, *mon ami*. And to save you she married that . . . that . . . Ach!" He flung up his hands in disgust and, turning on his heels, strode to the window.

The room went silent as each man brooded. After an indeterminably long time, Stephan withdrew from the window and came back to his seat.

"You are a fool, Christian," he said. "I am the one who forever plays the buffoon, but you are the fool. Ah, what a pair we make, eh *mon Capitaine*?"

Just then the door opened and Judson Ryan entered, leather case tucked beneath his arm like a permanent appendage. He walked briskly to the table and set the case down. As he removed his coat, he threw a glance at the two men who sat, heads down, like angry little boys.

"I see you both got my message," he said. "I had a difficult time tracking you down, but now that you're here . . . if you can put your personal differences aside for the time being . . . we've got business to discuss."

From his case he withdrew a deck of cards and began to shuffle, tapping the cards sharply on the table and shuffling them again before he began to deal. As he dealt, Ryan explained why he had summoned them. He spoke slowly, in words that made his meaning perfectly clear. Of the three, he was the only one who could conduct his cold, calculating business and play a hand of poker at the same time with enough skill to make him a fairly consistent winner.

"You will be delighted to learn of your next assignment," he said, looking over his cards at Christian. "I'm sending you to Anatolia."

"Anatolia? What the hell is there?" came the reply.

Clearing his throat, Ryan replied, without a hint of emotion, "Succeeding the Sultan to the throne is Prince Salim, who is now a virtual prisoner in the palace at Porte . . . some ancient tradition about keeping the heir secluded from the rest of the world. All he knows is what his viziers, or ministers, tell him. It's the Sultan's Grand Vizier who concerns us. Our sources tell us that this man, Grand Vizier Ghiza Kemal, though he pretends loyalty to the future Sultan, has his hands dipped into foreign pockets—English pockets."

"So?" said Stephan with a shrug. "Is it much of a threat to us?"

"That depends upon whether or not he can get rid of the present Sultan. If he could, and Salim came to power, it would be Kemal's voice behind the throne. That could be a threat to us."

Christian slammed his cards down and jumped to his

feet. "Damn the bastards!" he exclaimed. "They're in every corner!"

Observing the outburst with only mild interest, Ryan said "We may be able to swing it around our way. It all depends on one man."

Christian sat back down. From his pocket he withdrew a cigar and placed it between his lips. With a quick upward motion he struck a match on the sole of his boot and touched its flame to the tip of the cigar. "So, let's hear about this one man it all depends on."

Face expressionless, Ryan continued his story. "The regime has been plagued by rebel forces hiding in the deserts and the mountains. It's been going on for years, pretty much taken for granted, but that was before Tabori. So far, he's the only rebel leader who has successfully united his followers into a fighting force. His methods are strictly hit and run, something the Janissaries don't know how to deal with. We've made contact with him and he's at least willing to listen to our proposal."

"Which is?" Stephan inquired.

"If we help remove Ghiza Kemal from power, we will have an important ally in the Mediterranean."

Christian remained silent, but Stephan, puzzled, asked, "How is a rebel leader in a position to offer anything like that?"

"That's easy," replied Ryan. "You see, Tabori is the rightful heir to the throne. He is Salim's older brother. There were two older ones, but they were killed off by Kemal. Tabori escaped into the desert with his life, but not much more."

"So what you're saying," said Christian, speaking up at last, "is that if Kemal takes over, he'll throw in with England and that will be the end of us, that to a large extent our survival depends on this little desert rat."

Stephan was quick to speak up. "*Mon ami*, always you speak with the disrespect. This man is no silly creature, he is a prince. A man robbed of his title, not one who gives it away. One who fights to regain what is his instead of letting it fall into other hands." He gave

Christian a harsh look. "That is something you know about, eh *mon Capitaine*?"

Christian scowled, but allowed the remark to pass. To Ryan he said, "What kind of man is Ghiza Kemal?"

Ryan had been studying his cards. Now, scanning those face up on the table, he said, "He's a fiercely ambitious genius of war, bent on glory and renown." As he spoke he suppressed a smile glancing at the full house he held in his hand.

Impatiently, Christian ground out his cigar. "When do we leave?"

"We don't," replied Ryan without looking up from his cards. "You leave as soon as possible."

Stephan's face revealed as much surprise as Christian's. "I am not going with him?"

Ryan answered indirectly, addressing Christian. "It's a nice place, you'll love it there," he said, spreading his hand out on the table and revealing the full house of two jacks and three tens.

Christian Youngblood's blue eyes flicked contemptuously over the cards, then focused again on Judson Ryan's face. "We go together, or I don't go at all."

Ryan had come prepared for this resistance and countered it now. "He's needed somewhere else," he said, jerking his head toward Stephan. "I'm sending him to Paris with papers for Franklin."

The blue of Christian Youngblood's eyes was beginning to turn dark and murky, like midnight sapphires, the surest sign that he was approaching explosive anger. He repeated threateningly, "We both go together, or I don't go at all."

Stephan d'Ajasson could see what was coming. Jumping to his feet, focusing their attention immediately on to him he said, "Does no one think to ask me if I wish this thing?"

With a frown, Christian turned back to Ryan. "I told you before, you can't order me around anymore. My obligations to you are long since paid. And as for him," he jerked his thumb at Stephan, "he never owed you a damned thing. The only reason he joined your service

was because Franklin was such a frequent guest at his father's home. If I know that old conniver, Franklin, he probably made Stephan think he could settle for nothing less than the life of an espionage agent for the cause of liberty. You've got no strings on him, Ryan, what he does for you he does because he wants to."

He turned from Ryan and looked into Stephan's gray eyes. "What about it? Do you want to go where it up in Paris, or would you rather go meet this desert rat, Tabori?"

With a guilty look at Ryan, the Frenchman made his wishes clearly known.

"You see?" said Christian. "If you want this job done, Ryan, it's on our terms, not yours."

Judson Ryan sprang to his feet then. In a rare display of temper, he exploded at Christian Youngblood.

"Goddamn you!" he bellowed, surprising them with the depth and fierceness of his voice which was generally thin and reedy. "Youngblood, you've been a thorn in my side since the day I saved your miserable neck! Always challenging my orders! Always defying my authority! Damn your arrogant soul to hell! I should never have listened to Franklin!" He stomped away from the table and they watched him in silence. Tense minutes later, he returned to his chair, having reverted back to his usual controlled demeanor. "Very well," he said tersely, "you'll both go."

Stephan changed the subject in a hurry. "Ah!" he exclaimed, slapping his palm to his forehead. "I have not asked about his name. You say Tabori, but is that it?"

"His name is Ramir Tabori," answered Ryan.

Christian picked up his cards and gave Ryan a calculating look over them. "You say he's a prince?"

"Yes," said Ryan, watching him.

Only now did Christian bother to examine the cards on the table. Ryan's full house lay face up. With a smile, Christian slowly laid out his hand, fanning the cards to reveal two kings and three queens, a full house which turned Judson Ryan's face crimson with rage.

Stretching elaborately, Christian got up and strode to the door, confident that he'd won more than just a hand of poker. Stephan frowned at the paltry pair of nines he held, slapped them down on the table and followed after him.

"This Ramir Tabori," said Christian over his shoulder, "does he have a code name we should know?"

Ryan's eyes were still glued to Christian Youngblood's full house of royalty. He answered mechanically, "His men call him *El Shahin* . . . the Falcon."

Chapter 24

Washington's unpaid and half-starved army had grown weak, and the Tories were boasting that more Americans were fighting for the King than for independence. The dismal reality was that General Washington had as few as five thousand effectives centered at Morristown, with not enough bread to last ten days, and an undermanned American fleet bottled up by a British blockade. But the fledgling nation was not alone with its share of problems.

France, having at last announced in favor of independence for Britain's North American colonies, found herself embroiled in yet another war with England while she still had not paid for the cost of the last one.

England fared no better. Reports from London told of the weakening strength of Britain, where thousands of workmen were idle, some wasted to walking shadows for lack of food. British agents seeking loans throughout Europe found high interest rates adding to an already staggering national debt of two hundred million pounds sterling. British trade was in ruins, thanks to unrelenting privateer harassment, and the starving rural population made conditions ripe for rebellion. But, stubbornly determined to bring her errant North American wards to task, she struggled on, wrecking havoc with her still awesome military might.

The war continued unabated. French musket fire popped through the dense New England forests and across the fields of the South. Cannons roared from English ships at the mouth of Boston Harbor. Ameri-

can, Spanish, and rebel privateers raged up and down the Atlantic and Caribbean with devastating results.

The tumult of international cannonfire could be heard, literally, far out to sea and, figuratively, on a distant Mediterranean shore.

In the late summer, the plain of Antalya was unbearably hot. Malaria raged wherever a stagnant puddle of water sat. Ancient ruins lay deserted beneath the burning sun, giving the Ottoman province along the Mediterranean coast the look of a necropolis, a simmering city of the dead.

Night was beginning to flow like a murky river. The quality of the light was a strange steel gray. Clouds seemed unnatural, and there settled over everything an eerie tense feeling that could not be communicated with words. Bathed by moonlight, a small cluster of tents spiked the rocky coast. All were dark but one, the largest, whose walls undulated with soft shadows from within.

It was a typical desert tent, large enough to accommodate a gathering, made of fleece which had been worked into sturdy felt. Inside the tent wooden saddles were arranged to form a defensive wall. The floor was covered with mattresses topped with pillows of brightly colored silk. The walls were adorned with quilts and an assortment of leather and woven bags. The floor was spread with rugs, called kalims, made of brightly-colored felt strips and embroidered with silk and gold threads. There was little domestic equipment in sight beyond a few jars and wooded plates and some copper pots. The cooking stove was simply a huge earthenware jar, partly sunk into the ground, into which had been stuffed a mixture of chopped straw and animal dung for kindling.

A woman's soft giggles and a man's throaty laughter broke the dense stillness of the night. The man named Zyed, whose misfortune it had been to draw the evening watch, was reluctant to disturb their privacy, yet he knew he must.

Clearing his throat noisily, he waited a moment, then

entered the tent. He was met with an angry look from the man who reclined on a cotton-stuffed mattress, surrounded by pillows, his favorite plaything in his arms . . . as naked as the day she was born. Averting his eyes, the guard spoke in nervous haste.

"Ishak Bey awaits an audience, El Shahin."

"Send him away," came the curt reply. "I have no time for him now." But a look down at the girl in his arms changed his tone. "What is it, my love?" he asked the pouting, dark-eyed beauty. But he could guess and smiled. "Has Ishak Bey promised you a present upon his return?"

The flashing white smile he received answered his question. "Hmm, he seems to have something for you each time he comes. Since he seems to want you so much, perhaps I should give you to him."

He was teasing her and she knew it. She responded with a lazy stretch of her supple body, uncaring that the guard stood by, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. With a demure little smile, she said, "But I am not yours to give, El Shahin. If I were a slave, you could do with me as you wish, but I am not."

As she spoke, she ran a hand up to the nape of his neck where her fingers toyed with his short black hair. "Besides, you know he means nothing to me. He brings me pretty presents because I smile at him. But that is all I do for him."

Tightening her hold, she pulled his lips to hers and kissed him deeply, swirling her arrogant little tongue around his mouth until he pushed her away firmly, though with reluctance.

"You forget, Aleppa, that we are not alone."

Pointing to the guard, she laughed. "*Him?* He would not dare to look. Do you think he wants the scimitar of the mighty El Shahin piercing his heart?"

The sound of her laugh, deep, throaty, filled him with instant desire, but resisting the impulse to take her then and there, he said, "I have no wish to slay one of my best soldiers over a mere woman. Besides, perhaps Ishak Bey has also brought something for me . . . I

sent him out over a month ago. Let us find out what he has returned with."

With a gentle pat on her ample *derrière*, he sent her scurrying for her clothes. When her giggles subsided and she was seated beside him fully dressed, he clapped his hands, bringing the guard's eyes up from the floor.

"Send him in," he ordered, then he sat back on the pillows to wait.

When Ishak Bey was ten years old, the Sultan's army had swept through his village selecting those male children deemed attractive and strong enough to serve as slaves with the intention of turning the best of them into Janissaries. Some, those who exhibited rare intelligence and an uncompromising loyalty, went far. A few, like Ishak Bey, went directly into the Sultan's private service where he served as a military advisor.

Ishak Bey had done surprisingly well in the twenty years he had been serving the Sultan. He wore richly jeweled ceremonial robes, rode the finest Arabian horses and commanded a household of slaves of his own. Technically, he was still a slave, would always be. But such were the strange ways of his people that even a lowly slave could advance to awesome height.

Ishak Bey wore his honors blatantly, with a brisk stride and a haughty manner. But, like all true slaves, he also knew his place. He dared not, for instance, display his arrogance in the presence of the man he had come to see. For although he served the Sultan, he knew what few men did: that this man called El Shahin was the true ruler of the Empire.

He entered the tent followed by two eunuch slaves carrying a heavily rolled carpet on their shoulders. At the snap of his fingers, they placed it at his feet and withdrew.

The man reclining on the pillows studied the carpet, his black eyes narrowed suspiciously, his dark-skinned hand tugging absent-mindedly at his short dark beard. "A carpet?" he said, rising. "You have brought me a carpet?"

"A fine Persian carpet," Ishak Bey corrected.

The other man laughed shortly. "The finest Persian carpets in the Empire are not worth the seat of power they are meant to buy. I sent you out to secure for me something with which we can bargain with Ghiza Kemal and you return with a carpet . . . a *fine Persian carpet*." His mimicking voice stressed his scorn.

Ishak Bey stepped forward and placed a polished boot on the carpet. "Perhaps this will interest you more, El Shahin."

With a sharp shove he sent the carpet unfurling across the floor. A figure rolled out from its folds.

Approaching cautiously, the man Ishak Bey addressed as El Shahin appraised the slender, trembling figure that remained face down. Dressed in loose white trousers, a wide sash belted at the waist, it looked like a young Janissary recruit.

"First a carpet and now a boy! Surely you take me for a fool if you think—" But the rest of the words stuck in his throat when the figure rolled over and two emerald green eyes blazed up at him in haughty defiance.

Reaching down, Ishak Bey grasped the boy by the arm and pulled him to his feet. "Notice this also," he said, snatching the hood from the youth's head.

A mass of dark hair came tumbling down in wild disarray about the face and shoulders of what was obviously a woman.

Just then Aleppa rose from the pillows and came forward. Whatever else Ishak Bey was going to say fled from his mind at the sight of her.

She was wearing billowy trousers that hugged her low on the hips and were gathered tightly at each slim ankle. A brief halter of gauze covered her full round breasts. On each arm above her elbow she wore wide silver bracelets studded with turquoise. Amulets dangled from her neck to fall between the curve of her breasts, and in the small hollow of her navel was a ruby red stone. Across her face a veil of the sheerest gauze made a poor attempt at hiding her features. Above it, dark brown eyes ringed in heavy black lashes flashed, partly in surprise, partly in . . . jealousy?

Ishak Bey watched her approach, his own dark eyes taking her in hungrily.

There followed a rapid discussion, every now and then a pair of dark eyes straying to the woman with the green eyes . . . Aleppa's jealous inspection, Ishak Bey's haughty, self-satisfied glance, and the unsettling, probing look of the man called El Shahin.

He was dressed more ruggedly than Ishak Bey, in trousers, full-sleeved cambric shirt, wide sash belted at his slim waist and high polished boots. His dark eyes shone like onyx in a swarthy complexion, and he had strong features—a prominent nose, full, expressive lips, dark brows to match his dark hair and the short beard at his chin. Taken feature by feature, he was something considerably less than handsome, but his total appearance was striking with a somber elegance.

Suppressing a smile of amusement, he said to Ishak Bey, "If you think Ghiza Kemal Pasha will be tempted by a woman, then perhaps you know something about him that I do not. I had not thought him capable of so human an emotion as lust."

Ishak Bey laughed. "That is not quite what I had in mind. Had I thought we could buy him with a woman, I would not have brought one so skinny. This one looks like a hungry pup to me, hardly worthy of a man's attention . . . unlike some of our own beauties."

As he spoke, his eye drifted to the full-bodied Aleppa. Pleased to see how his praise only made her glow more radiantly, he tore his gaze away, saying, "This one is scrawny, but she is spirited. And she had much to say when we pulled her off that ship. Aside from calling me the most vile names she could think of in an assortment of languages, she also told me some very interesting things after she had kicked and scratched at me sufficiently. It appears, El Shahin, that we have captured a real prize this time. Do you remember we spoke some months ago about the plans Ghiza Kemal confided to me? How he was arranging a substantial transaction with a private party?"

"Yes, I do. You were to advise me whether it would be of any use to us to intercede."

"You may decide that now when I tell you what I have learned from this little mongrel. First, that private party has turned out to be an Englishman . . . a duke, no less."

"An Englishman!" Aleppa's eyes lit up. "You see, Ramir? Did I not say that Kemal was making deals with the English?" She tugged at his sleeve for attention.

But he was not listening. "What else?"

"This woman is his wife."

Again Aleppa could not contain herself. "A duchess? Oh Ramir, please let me have her! Please give her to me! I need another slave—Celira has grown so lazy these days—and I would just love to have a duchess waiting on me. Oh please!"

But he was not listening. Eyes fixed now on the green-eyed captive woman, he mentally calculated the value of this unexpected prize. Slowly a smile crept across his lips. Turning back to Ishak Bey, he remarked, "It could be that this Englishman will be very angry when he learns of the failure of his mission and the disappearance of his wife. Would you not think so?"

Ishak Bey nodded. "Angry enough to call Ghiza Kemal to task, I would say. The English can be so unreasonable."

"Yes," murmured Ramir Tabori thoughtfully. "And since Ghiza Kemal has need of British friends these days, how eager do you think he would be to return this woman to her husband?"

"Too eager," Ishak Bey observed derisively. "I think we should keep the woman ourselves and let the full power of the English come down on Kemal. That would save us the trouble of doing it. With Kemal out of the way, the path would be clear for *you* to move into power instead of Salim."

Aleppa pushed herself forward. "He is right, Ramir. We should keep the woman. Let Ghiza Kemal strangle

on his own deviousness. She is more valuable to us here. I will put her to work at once!"

Ramir shot her an amused look. "As much as you would like to have her for your slave, Aleppa, the answer is no. We will keep her only until the time is right to hand her over to Kemal. But, of course," he added, "we will not do that until he comes to us begging for her."

"But Ramir," Aleppa protested, "he does not even know we have her!"

"He will." Turning to Ishak Bey, he issued staccato orders. "Return to Istanbul at once. Tell Kemal I have captured the ship . . . the . . . what is it?"

"The *Ariel*."

"The *Ariel*. Tell him I have captured the *Ariel* and am holding a woman who claims to be a duchess. Tell him that, of course, I believe none of her story, but that it suits me to keep her. The sooner Kemal learns that his business with the Duke has been discovered, the sooner he will begin to squirm. Watch him and report to me. My guess is he will be ready to negotiate within six months."

Ishak Bey looked dismayed. "But if we give him the woman on his word alone that he will step down from power, how could we ever believe him?"

Ramir snorted in contempt. "I would sooner trust a scorpion in my boot." He shook his head. "We would be fools to believe that scoundrel. No, I was thinking that with Kemal preoccupied with this Englishman, it could provide the distraction we need to move in close enough for the kill. He has that palace at Tirana guarded like the royal coffers. If I could just get my men close enough to attack . . ."

"But I thought we decided that we are still too weak to inflict any real damage. We agreed to wait."

"We can wait ourselves right out of this struggle," Ramir pointed out. "That is no way to win a war, and that is why I have decided to call in help."

"Help?" Ishak Bey was puzzled. "I do not under-

stand. We can do this ourselves without help if we just wait and exercise caution."

Ramir eyed him with annoyance. "Always you council me to wait—not now, you say, the river is too high; not now the sun is too strong, the winds too harsh. I am beginning to wonder whether all this waiting is rendering us ineffective."

"I have advised you as I have seen fit," replied Ishak Bey stiffly. "If I have exercised caution, it is only because I know Ghiza Kemal. He is methodical, calculating, a man who plans with great cunning. I am only doing what he would do. . . ." His indignation was evident.

"All the same," said Ramir, "I do not wish to impress the man with my cunning, but to destroy him. So I have called in some men who can possibly add a new dimension to our warfare. Perhaps we have much to learn yet. Maybe we are too cautious, and a bit more daring might be needed to win this battle against Kemal."

"Well, who are they then? Where are they from? Can they be trusted?"

"All in due course," answered Ramir. "Now, if there is nothing else to keep you, you should return to Istanbul immediately. My guard will see that you and your slaves have fresh horses for the journey."

Ishak Bey hesitated. He disliked the manner in which he was being dismissed, but it was something else that kept him from leaving. Awkwardly, his eyes moved to Aleppa.

Blushing, the girl gave him a seductive smile.

Ramir frowned at the exchange, but remembering Aleppa's childlike fascination with surprises, as he clasped Ishak Bey's hand in farewell, he said, "Aleppa will show you to your horse."

He could hear her giggling as Ishak Bey followed her from the tent. The little fool, Ramir Tabori thought, half-amused, half-angry at the thought of Aleppa's greedy little hands always looking for presents. Any

other man would have gone into a rage at the thought of this woman in another man's arms, but Ramir Tabori only shrugged it off. Eventually, he supposed, Ishak Bey would offer Aleppa the present that would win her into his bed permanently. Until then she was a warm female body to keep him warm at night.

Dismissing from his mind the full-breasted, dark-eyed beauty, the man the others called El Shahin turned his attention to the other woman, unable to disguise his interest.

He'd never seen anything quite like her. She was dressed like a boy—indeed, even built like one, from what he could see of her figure beneath the loose-fitting clothes—and the glint of her green eyes had a touch of arrogance that no woman could possess . . . at least, not the women *he'd* known.

He was intrigued. Her eyes were the most astonishing shade of green he had ever seen. Certainly in all of Anatolia there was not a blade of grass or a leaf or a precious stone to match their vibrant color. Their upward slant gave her a wicked look, reminding him of the peoples of the northern provinces around the Black Sea.

He studied her; her delicate features, the most astonishingly beautiful face he'd ever seen. Beyond her appearance was a smoldering defiance, convincing him that this woman would never accept the kind of obedience men expected of their women. No, not this one, he thought. There is too much fire in her . . . too much life . . . too much passion.

He desired her instantly. He could have taken her right there . . . after all, she *was* his. Instead, he returned to his pillows, but even as he poured honey water into a goblet, his eyes strayed back to her. Tilting the goblet to his lips, he drank slowly, watching her, appraising her.

So, she was a duchess. She seemed young . . . could she even be twenty years old? And she was certainly much too exotic to be an Englishwoman. The English

he had learned many years ago came back to him, a bit rusty at first. He said, "You will excuse me, but you are not English."

He meant it as a question, of course, and certainly had no intention of offending her. But she shot him an annoyed look, exclaiming, "Most certainly not! I am French!"

"But you are married to an Englishman."

Green eyes blazed a warning at him. "We all make mistakes, and I'll not discuss mine with you!"

Ramir grinned. She had a sharp tongue for such a little thing. Why, she barely came to his shoulder!

"I demand to know why I was brought here and what you intend to do with me!" she hurled at him.

Amused by her haughty manner, Ramir Tabori reclined comfortably back on his pillows and said calmly, "If you will come sit beside me, I will tell you why you are here."

Juliette hesitated, unsure of his motives.

"I'll not speak to you while you stand before me making angry demands. If you wish to speak about it, come sit beside me." Reading her thoughts, he laughed out loud, bringing an angry flush to her cheeks. "I'll not bite you, not unless you want me to."

Wanting to appear unafraid, Juliette came forward, though inside she trembled like a leaf on a windy day. She sat down next to him and haltingly accepted the goblet he offered.

"Well, that is a start," he said with a teasing smile. "So you wish to know why you are here. Very well then . . ."

Hours later when he'd finished telling her much more than he had planned and looked deep into her eyes for understanding, Juliette whispered, "Why did you tell me all of this?"

Ramir sighed heavily and confessed, "I honestly do not know. I have known you but a few short hours, and yet . . ."

The unfinished sentence lingered in the air as his eyes

sought and held hers. He was the first to look away.

"Now you know why I cannot let you leave, why you must stay with me."

Juliette choked back a sob. Dear God, could it be that she could have come to understand this strange man so well? How was it that in a few hours she could know the sincerity of his words and feel a desperate disbelief in the struggle he'd confided to her? It was an incredible story, almost a fairy tale, yet for some crazy reason, she believed every word of it . . . even when he claimed to be a prince of an empire.

Unable to look into his black eyes, for there was too much of his feelings written in them, Juliette spoke to the ground. "But you said you would have to give me to that man . . . that Pasha. I don't understand . . ."

Ramir looked away quickly, unable to bear her look of pained confusion. "Yes . . . but perhaps I can find another way." He began to search his mind for another way the moment she had opened her mouth to speak.

But if he was not going to give her to Kemal, what *would* he do with her, Ramir asked himself. She was hardly suited to soldiering, like some of the other women of the village. They were proud to fight at his side, but this little one would never see battle—she was far too precious to risk losing to war. And he suppressed a chuckle when he envisioned attempting to turn her into a docile, obedient woman. This one would never make a good slave!

What, then, was he going to do with her? At the moment, there seemed to be just one solution.

He turned to her and gently took the goblet from her hand. Juliette stiffened, holding back, uncertain, wary of yielding to this man who was a stranger to her. But there was nothing but gentleness in his eyes, tenderness in his touch, softness to his lips as they covered hers.

And it had been such a long time since she'd been held in a man's strong, protective embrace . . . such a very long time.

Chapter 25

Was it real? Any of it?

The sun now rose on the horizon of a strange and frightening land that bore no resemblance whatsoever to the elegance of Paris, the cluttered cobblestones of London, or the forest green of the English countryside.

This land was tinderbox dry with yellow-white sun scorching the gritty desert sand beneath her feet. It was an inhospitable land where harsh winds whipped across the dunes with savage fury and deadly creatures skulked beneath craggy rocks.

It seemed to Juliette just yesterday that she had been standing on deck of the *Ariel*, the cool ocean breeze rustling her hair and dreamy visions of Sardinia in her mind. It was to have been a vacation, a welcome change from the deception of Amherst.

Vacation indeed! First she'd been dragged kicking and screaming off the ship by a group of dark-skinned pirates who spoke a strange tongue and looked at her with mocking black eyes. Then she was unceremoniously plunked onto the back of a camel—a disagreeable beast that tried to nip her whenever it could—and was bumped and jostled over a hundred miles of burning desert. And then, after countless days of precious little to drink, her throat perpetually dry and raw, her cheeks streaked with dust, and sand forever in her hair and eyes, she had been bound up inside a rolled carpet. Had she dreamed it all? Would she awaken to find herself in her bedroom instead of a cloth tent?

In the days that followed, Juliette realized it was no

dream. The more involved she became in the life going on about her, the more convinced she became of its reality.

During the days she worked with the other women, making fuel cakes out of straw and dung, or beating heaps of dry chickpeas with a stick to free the grain from the pod. She carried in the water, swept the tent free of dust, and even found time to work at the loom the way the old women had shown her.

The hours spent beneath the hot sun soon turned her skin a spicy brown. She hiked her cambric skirt well past her knees and had fashioned a halter out of a strip of blue Salonica cloth to expose her shoulders. In no time she was as darkly alluring as the other women; when she walked barefoot to the waterhole, she looked almost like one of them.

Still, there were certain things that set her apart. One was her body which, despite the voracious appetite she'd acquired these days, still remained slender, in sharp contrast to her full-hipped, large-breasted companions. Another was her eyes, the only emerald green gaze among so many dark ones. And then there was her manner. She did nothing unless it pleased her to.

Her strange, erratic moods and emotional tantrums only made Ramir Tabori crave her more. He would watch her in amusement, encouraging her defiance, for she was truly the most exotic, spirited creature he had ever attempted to tame.

At night, with her peasant garb thrown aside and her naked, writhing body glistening by the light of a smudge fire, she resembled a cat, long-limbed and sleek, with muscles neither weak nor overdeveloped, but stretched to suppleness when her slim legs were wrapped around him. She would allow his strong brown hands to touch and probe, stroke and caress her flesh to quivering. His kisses, deep and demanding, left her breathless, and she had begun to look forward to his visits with sharp-edged excitement.

Caught in her spell, Ramir could not have enough to her. He would take her in the morning upon waking.

He would take her after an exhilarating ride across the desert when his blood was pumping heavily through his veins. He would send for her from the grain fields and take her with the guards posted outside the tent to overhear her breathless moans.

For her part, Juliette had learned to live only for the moment. Thoughts of the past only distressed her and those of the future made her fearful. So much had happened, there was no telling what the future held in store. Was there to be a future at all? Sometimes she wondered if she even cared.

These were carefree, exciting days when she rode at Ramir's side across the desert, feeling the hot, arid wind in her hair and the sun on her cheeks. At night she lay in the arms of her nomadic lover who worshipped her and promised her the world with his kisses.

It was hard to remember that the peaceful feeling of sun-drenched days and passion-filled nights could be shattered any time by an attack from the Sultan's armies. It was even more impossible to believe that this man in whose arms she lay drowsily content was a rebel leader, an enemy of the Empire.

Together they would laugh at the thought of it, for *he* was the Empire. He had kept nothing from her—not who he was, nor what he was fighting for, nor why he was forced to leave her from time to time to lead his rebel forces in surprise raids against the Janissaries.

It was an awesome sight when the men rode out to battle. Astride his white Arabian stallion, Ramir would gallop up and down his followers' ranks, shouting encouragement to them, while they would raise rifles high into the air to the shout of "El Shahin!" In one vast wave they would gallop out of camp and disappear in a massive dust cloud out on the desert.

It was impossible not to be caught up in the feverish excitement of the departure for battle, or the grief when they brought in the dead. It made Juliette shudder to think that one day it might be Ramir who would be lost. Without him to protect her and care for her, she was truly lost. Even now she could feel the

resentment because of her favored place in El Shahin's eyes. Juliette did her best to ignore it and, for the most part, her days were spent in hard work, her nights in wicked pleasure.

She did not notice that Aleppa grew more sullen as the weeks went by, her sulkiness turning to hostility as Juliette spent more and more time in Ramir's arms.

The night was overwhelmingly silent. Overhead the sky was ebony velvet strung with millions of sparkling diamonds. Peeking out from behind a dusty cloud, a full moon found the nomad encampment secluded in the lush greenery of a rare desert oasis, the torch-lit tents scattered about the shore of a silent lake whose surface mirrored the moon's reflection.

The barest rustle of a breeze could be heard sifting through the uppermost branches when Aleppa emerged from the lake, her naked body glistening with beads of moisture, her black hair hanging in tangles down her back. With slow, purposeful movements she dried herself with a handful of leaves, hands running lazily over her full breasts, past wide, rounded hips and down the length of each brown thigh. Cupping her palm, she poured into it the contents of the vial she'd brought to the lake with her. With smooth, caressing fingers she massaged the oil of jasmine into her flesh until her body shone in the starlight. Seductively, she caressed each breast and allowed her fingers to linger at private places. She took her time, smiling to herself, for she knew she was being watched. She did not grab for her garments, but left them where they were. Stretching herself out on the ground, the moonlight playing across her naked body, she waited for him to approach.

He spoke not a word as he dropped down beside her, but he could not suppress the moan that broke his lips when her hand reached for his and placed it on her breast. Then, turning her face to his, she closed her eyes and awaited his lips.

Ishak Bey could not believe his luck. For so long he had wanted this woman, and here she was now, naked

and waiting, her eager little tongue pushing past his lips, her big golden thighs parted for his fingers, her stroking hands driving him wild.

"Aleppa . . ." he groaned when she slid her oiled body down the length of his, kissing, biting, teasing with her lips, her tongue.

He had never known a woman like her, so demanding that she did not wait for him to act, but guided him through the motions as if she were the master and he the slave. It was she who placed each breast at his lips and encouraged him to suck each nipple. She who pressed his fingers against the triangle of coarse, black hair between her legs. She who pushed him onto his back and straddled him with her knees so that his swollen, throbbing manhood penetrated her deeply, and she rocked and pumped, slowly at first, then driving hard and fast until she had reduced him to a mass of breathless, quivering flesh.

When at last she rolled off him and they lay side by side, his breathing slowly returning to normal, Aleppa turned to him, caressing his chest, smiling, dark eyes gleaming.

"You were away much too long this time," she whispered.

He wrapped an arm tighter about her bare shoulders and replied, "It was worth the wait."

Slipping from his arms, Aleppa went over to where she had dropped her garments on the ground, aware of his eyes following her. She dressed slowly, seductively, returning to him only when she was certain she had aroused him all over again.

His hands reached out to take her, but she coyly pushed them away. "Later there will be more," she whispered, flashing a brilliant smile, "much more."

Desire for her made Ishak Bey's throat go dry. But he'd waited too long to spoil it now by insisting. Reluctantly, he let her go, and they walked back to her tent together. As he turned to leave her, she suddenly came up close, pressing herself against him, her warm breath tickling his ear.

"Why not stay here with me tonight?" she murmured.

Ishak Bey ran his tongue over his lips. "But . . . but Ramir? What would he say if he knew?"

Aleppa smiled scornfully. "Oh *him*," she answered. "Ramir means nothing to me. I only go to him because he commands it. Besides, he is not here, he has been away now for ten days."

Ishak Bey may have been blinded by her beauty, but he was no fool. Something made him wonder whether she was as indifferent as she pretended.

"Could it be," he suggested, holding her by the wrists, "that he means nothing to you because of the time he spends with the French woman? So!" he said, fingers tightening painfully on her wrists, "you play games with me to make him jealous, is that it, Aleppa?"

"I play games with you," she replied, squirming away, "because I desire you as much as you desire me . . . and because I wish to make you a proposition. In this way I am certain to have your attention."

"You have always had my attention," he reminded her. "But in spite of the presents I bring you, you have never given me anything in return . . . until tonight. Why? What sort of wicked scheme are you devising?"

She smiled up at him. "Ahhhh," she purred like a dangerous feline, "do you know me so well?"

"Better than Ramir does," Ishak Bey said, "but then the mighty El Shahin at times can see only the good in people—a crucial weakness in one who would lead an Empire."

"And is that all he has seen in you, Ishak Bey?" she asked as she turned to enter the tent. "Or am I the only one who notices the dark look in your eyes whenever his back is turned?"

He followed her in. Grasping her by the arm, he spun her around sharply, pulling her up against his chest. His mouth came down on hers in a cruel, demanding kiss. When he released her, he stepped back to watch with a

tight smile as she gingerly touched a finger to her bruised lips.

"You mentioned a proposition. What is it?"

Aleppa pouted like a spoiled child. "My intuition tells me that your feelings for El Shahin fall short of undying love, but whatever they are, I am certain you would not wish to see him fail in his struggle against Ghiza Kemal Pasha."

A flicker of interest showed in his black eyes. "Go on."

"I need your help," she said simply. "Unless, of course, your loyalty to El Shahin is as questionable as your fondness of him."

His lips tightened. Tersely, he replied, "My loyalty is undivided."

"Ah, yes, but on which side does it lie, I wonder?"

He could have struck her. If she had been any other woman, he would not have hesitated. "You mentioned a proposition," he said coldly. "I am still waiting to hear it."

She left him for a moment and returned with two goblets. "It is the woman," she said, handing a goblet to him. "She has been turning her wiles on him, making him do crazy things. And I fear she might, in some way, affect the outcome of our struggles against Kemal. She must be stopped. Ramir must be made to see what she is."

He eyed her curiously, for he had not thought her so committed to El Shahin's struggle. Had he misjudged her? Or was it only jealousy's dark, ugly voice rising from her heart?

"She has been sent here, I tell you," Aleppa went on. "Perhaps it was Kemal himself who planted her on that ship for you to find!"

"You are talking nonsense, Aleppa. I tell you that ship was bound for Sardinia and that the woman is just what she says she is. You can tell that just by looking at her."

"And what is that? A duchess? Oh, pah!" She spat

on the floor. "I say she is a spy for Kemal! And the words she whispers into Ramir's ears have been taught her by Kemal. Ramir has turned to her now for military advice. Can you imagine it? He consults her before his battles. Oh, I tell you, Ishak Bey, this one has been well trained by Kemal. She has not only taken my place in Ramir's bed, but *your* place in his confidence! Yes, it is true, why do you look at me as though you cannot believe it? I have heard them discussing strategy, maneuvers, timing. All the things you once counseled him on, the mighty El Shahin now discusses with a *woman*—and a traitorous woman at that!"

Ishak Bey's complexion had gone milk-white and the muscles of his jaws tightened violently. Usurped by a woman? The thought was preposterous! Insulting! Small blue veins showed in his temples as he fought to suppress his rage.

Aleppa pressed on. "We can do something about it. We can save Ramir from that woman by getting rid of her."

Forcing his voice to remain calm, he asked, "Do you have a plan?"

"A horse and camel caravan passes near here every third month from Basra. It is due in the next two or three nights. Traveling with it will be Yozgat, the slave trader, who is always looking for pretty women to sell at the markets in Istanbul. We need only deliver the woman to him and that will be the last we—or Ramir—ever see of her."

"And I suppose she will go with the caravan willingly when you simply ask her to?"

She gave him a disgusted look. "That one does nothing willingly unless it pleases her. That is why we must place these into her drink."

She opened her palm to reveal the crushed red petals of a poppy. Pressing them into his hand, she said, "Use only enough to make her drowsy."

Ishak Bey cocked an eyebrow at her. "Oh? Am I to be the one who administers it?"

"She would most likely be suspicious if I were to visit

her tent," said Aleppa. "I have been somewhat less than friendly to her. But she would not question a visit from you. You need just sprinkle them into her drink and sit back and wait for it to take effect. Then you can carry her out to the place where I will have your horse waiting. The caravan should be less than a night's ride from here, so you will be able to return quickly."

"I see," he said, "and what do I get for my trouble?"

She moved against him, brushing his sleeve with her shoulder, then turned to face him so that her big breasts pressed against his chest.

"Me."

She was a scheming demon to be sure, and he still was not convinced that her dangerous plan was devised to save Ramir from the clutches of a traitorous woman. But looking down into her provocative, teasing eyes, feeling her leg rubbing against his, the scent of her perfumed body filling his senses and making him dizzy, Ishak Bey wondered if he dare refuse her offer. So long he had wanted her, craved her perfect flesh, longed to lie between her naked, parted thighs . . .

Aleppa laughed, a deep, throaty sound, as he put an arm about her waist and pulled her close, burying his face in her thick black hair, pressing his lips to her neck and telling her with his kisses that he would do anything for her . . . anything.

A triumphant little smile curled the girl's full lips. That will teach Ramir, she thought, as she moved her body slightly to accomodate Ishak Bey's seeking fingers. He will soon learn that he cannot toss me out of his bed for another woman. Not when it is I who would do anything for him . . . I who love him!

Chapter 26

In the pale moonlight, the encampment of tents looked like huge boulders scattered along the Mediterranean shore. Nothing stirred outside, but in the largest tent three men sat conversing softly, dining at tables low to the ground.

Mutton with rice, usually reserved only for celebrations, was served to honor the two visitors, along with sweet drinks of sherbet and honey water. They feasted hungrily on a sweet made of dried apricots, almonds, and cream.

When they were through, the wooden plates were removed. Ramir Tabori clapped his hands, sending the serving girls from the tent. Then, settling himself back comfortably on his silken pillows, he dispensed abruptly with the small talk that had carried them through the meal.

"My friends, you know who I am, what I am. You know that by blood right I am the next ruler of this Empire. If you wish to know something of my loyalties, let me tell you of the things you do not know. You do not know, for instance, that all judicial decisions in the land are given in favor of those who offer the largest payment to the judges, or that peasants are turned from their lands so that the tax collectors can bring in farmers who offer higher bribes and pay higher taxes. The bulk of the military positions in the army are held by those unable, or unwilling, to perform their duties. As it is, the army is composed mostly of untrained, undisciplined rabble plucked off the streets. Nepotism

and corruption are destroying the Empire. Anatolia is infested with brigands and autonomous nobles who barely acknowledge the suzerainty of the Sultan. The fortress at Tirana, mightiest in all of Anatolia, is in the hands of Ghiza Kemal Pasha, a ruthlessly ambitious feudal lord appointed by the Sultan who no longer abides by the Sultan's authority. As it is now, Kemal's power is growing, but it is manageable. If he succeeds, however, in putting my brother Salim on the throne—as my sources tell me he is plotting to do—then his power will be absolute.”

Ramir shook his head. “Salim means well, but he has an infinite capacity for self-delusion. He is weak, ineffective. Without Kemal he is nothing. Unfortunately, if Kemal goes, so must Salim. It is not an easy task I have before me, my friends, for I do not wish to see my brother harmed. Yet, if I do not prevent Salim from coming to power, the Empire will surely crumble in Kemal's massive fist.”

A pair of light blue eyes studied the Turk's dark face. “Are you equipped to fight?” Christian Youngblood asked bluntly.

Ramir shrugged. “My men are loyal, but they are few . . . we can inflict only minor damage. That is why, when your government approached me with an offer of assistance, I immediately asked that they send you to me.” He smiled at the surprised look that brought. “Ah, Captain, it seems you are spoken of in the most unlikely places. Halfway around the globe, here sit I on my pillows, sipping honey water and reciting verses from the Koran, yet I, too, have heard of your brilliant exploits against the British. I commend you for your daring, Captain Youngblood. That is why I wish you to teach me how to win my battle at sea, for on land we are impotent.”

As he spoke, he saw a spark of interest ignite in Christian Youngblood's remarkable eyes. Pressing on, Ramir said, “That is where we must strike from—the sea. We Turks do not possess the best navy, it is true, but certainly the vessels I have captured are better

equipped than Kemal's. You must teach me how to put those ships to use against him. You have certainly had your letter long enough to know the finer points of naval warfare."

He was referring to the letter of marque, issued by governments in wartime to privateer captains and authorizing them to take enemy prizes where they could. Such a letter had been conferred upon Christian Youngblood by the American government, sanctioning his attacks on the British.

"It is your expertise I require, gentlemen, your ingenuity, your cunning. Will you help?"

"It is easy," Stephan d'Ajasson told him. "All you must do is sweep the decks with canister and grape shot, riddle the sails and cut the stays with chain and shrapnel, shatter masts, and pierce the hull with cannon fire. In short, leave the enemy ship helpless."

The Turk laughed. "Ah yes, but will you teach me how to do those things?"

"Do you have adequate means?" asked Christian abruptly, finding no humor in Stephan's response. "If not, we'd be wasting our time when we're needed elsewhere. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, Captain," replied Ramir, "but I think you will be surprised at the little armada I have amassed. My men even captured a French ship bound for Izmir. We kept what crew we thought would fetch a ransom and let the others go. The ship has been outfitted with cannons from a rotting warship and now she is ready for battle."

"A French ship, you say?" There was nothing playful in Stephan's manner now. "Your war is not with the French."

"Nor will it be, because I have need of all the help I can get. But you see, I have a man working inside the Grand Vizier's official chambers in Istanbul who told me that it was really an English ship flying a French flag. A clever ruse, I would say."

Christian glanced quickly at Stephan. "English but

flying a French flag? Tell me, what was the name of the ship?"

Ramir thought a moment, tugging at his beard. "The *Ariel* . . . yes, that is it. Why?"

"The *Ariel*!" exclaimed Stephan. "That is a Black Star ship!"

Christian barely heard him. Watching Ramir closely he asked, "You said you ransomed some of the crew. Did you find anything interesting . . . anything odd?"

"There was nothing of particular interest, but odd? Well, yes, there was something very odd. I only wish she were here to show you. You simply would not believe it."

"She? What do you mean 'she'? Do you mean to tell me there was a woman aboard that ship?"

Ramir was beginning to grow uncomfortable beneath the demanding glare of Christian's blue eyes, and he was reluctant to speak about something that hurt him too much to think about. Rising from his pillows, cursing himself for having mentioned it at all, he began to pace nervously about the tent.

"There was a woman aboard," he admitted, "a most unusual woman. At times I think it was Allah himself who sent her to me, but not for the use I could have put her to—such as bribing Kemal, as was my original intention—but for the mere fact that I have never known a woman like her. For the first time in my life, I thought seriously of relinquishing my pursuit of the throne. I found something so much rarer than an empire." He spoke, unaware of the tension building in the air and the strange silence that had fallen over the other two men.

From his crosslegged position on the floor, Christian asked, as casually as he could, "What was she like, this goddess from heaven?"

A sad little smile tugged at Ramir's lips. "Ah, she was like a flower, so beautiful and delicate. But tough and strong too, like a bamboo tree. She was a fighter, a spirited little warrior who could fight everything but her

own passion. That, my friends, was endless. She was part angel, part gypsy, formed strictly for pleasure."

"What color were her eyes?" was the next question from his American visitor.

Ramir looked off into space, frowning as if he were seeing them then. "They were green," he whispered.

Christian was on his feet. "What do you mean they were green? What's happened to her? Where is she now?"

Ramir shook his head. "I don't know where she is," he said. "She has been gone now for weeks."

"Gone? Where?"

Throwing his hands up, Ramir cried, "I do not know! I returned to camp from a skirmish in the hills with Kemal's Janissaries and found her gone. One of the other women told me she just picked herself up and left one night with a passing caravan!"

"And you believe the other woman?" Christian pressed him.

"Aleppa? I have wondered . . . I will speak to her about it again, although I have already questioned her repeatedly. I will tell you this, though. I will find that woman again if I must die in the effort!"

Christian Youngblood had heard enough. Could there be any doubt who the woman was who had conquered the heart of El Shahin! Damn the bitch for the witch she was! And curse this desert rat, thought Christian bitterly, if he's so eager to die for her, maybe I'll oblige him with my own sword!

"Why are you so curious about her?" Ramir asked, his dark eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Just then Stephan rose and came forward. "Ah, my hot-blooded friend here, always he thinks of nothing but the ladies. Even now, see how curious he is about a woman he does not even know."

His laugh sounded convincing enough, but it drew a look of annoyance from Christian. Stephan ignored the warning sign. Turning back to Ramir, he said, "Before you say that the *Ariel* was sent by an Englishman. Who was that man, do you know?"

Ramir replied matter-of-factly, "Yes, the Duke of Amherst."

Stephan whistled and shot a warning look at his companion who stood tight-lipped and silent.

Ramir Tabori sensed danger, yet these men were here to help him, he told himself . . . the Frenchman at least. Ramir was not all that certain about the blue-eyed captain. For some reason, the man seemed to dislike him. For now he would not pursue it, though, not when there were more pressing matters to deal with.

"So? Will you help me? Can I count on your aid, my friends?"

Christian Youngblood stared stonily into the Turk's dark-skinned face when he answered him. "Yes."

His look was cold, but inside he raged with hot fury. You bet he would help and he would not leave this damned place until he found her!

Chapter 27

Ghiza Kemal was a very busy man. As Grand Vizier, he was the Sultan's Chief Minister and commander of the army in times of war. As Governor of the Mediterranean province of Tirana, he ruled a walled fortress and his own private army with iron might. As cultural advisor to Prince Salim, he was responsible for whatever worldly knowledge was absorbed by the Empire's future ruler. In fact, the young prince had come to depend on him for virtually everything.

An extremely shrewd man, he had achieved his status after an astoundingly rapid ascension through the ranks of the Corps of Janissaries, those paid soldiers who were the Sultan's most powerful weapon. But it had not been without cost.

Cut off in childhood from his family, forbidden to marry or learn a skill that would allow him to engage in trade, his life was made up of fighting in wartime and preparing for war in peacetime. To compensate for those human pleasures closed to him because of his rank and position, he threw himself into his military endeavors with exaggerated zeal. He was able with all weapons, particularly skillful at archery and with the crooked dagger he carried at his belt. At the age of thirty-seven, he was a finely-tuned, well-oiled implement of war—a military genius who was also a Turkish lord, or Pasha, in the bargain.

His official residence—known as Babiali, or High Gate—was a monument of outlandish elegance. Yet, Ghiza Kemal was as much the Sultan's slave as the

lowliest recruit, and subject to summary execution, or expulsion from office, if he lost favor with the Sultan. It was a situation he found increasingly irksome, particularly when in Istanbul and forced to pay physical homage to a man he secretly despised.

More and more these days, Ghiza Kemal's dark eyes strayed to the young Prince Salim who, by Ottoman tradition, was a veritable prisoner within the palace walls, forced to rely solely upon his advisors for news of the outside world. The young Prince, however, showed little interest in ruling an empire. Ghiza Kemal, quick to appraise the situation, had long ago insinuated himself into the Prince's confidence. It was a position that would one day pay off on a much grander scale, he knew. What was the pleasure of governing a mere province when, through Salim, he could command an empire?

At first he had been content to await Salim's natural accession to the throne. But as his own power grew, so did Kemal's relentless ambition. Now it suited his avaricious purpose to see Salim on the throne with all due haste . . . and at all cost, even if it meant the forcible deposition of the Sultan.

Ghiza Kemal had spent years accumulating bits and pieces of information, years gaining the confidence of those who would never suspect him of plotting to overthrow the Sultan . . . years waiting for the chance to prove what fools they all were! He'd cultivated friends in all the right places and had succeeded in thoroughly intimidating those below him. He had, in the process, acquired his own little coterie of spies. Confident that his time was near at hand, he was content . . . for now . . . to sit back and wait.

The slave market of Istanbul, near the Burnt Column, was rigidly supervised. The slaves were kept clean and treated humanely. Of the women, only the black slaves who were to be sold for menial labor were displayed for sale. The beautiful white ones were kept secluded. They were mostly from Circassia and Georgia, in Southern Russia, with a more exotic foreign

beauty here and there who had been captured in war and whose ransom had not been paid.

All the markets were patrolled vigilantly by inspectors of weights and measures. In Istanbul, the Chief Inspector was the Grand Vizier himself who made a tour of the slave markets every Thursday.

One particularly hot and sultry Thursday afternoon Ghiza Kemal strode through the districts of Istanbul. Dressed in a red caftan richly embroidered with gold silk and trimmed with blue velvet, a bright blue turban on his head, he conducted his official business in his usual brisk, efficient manner.

He paused for more than a cursory review, however, at the stall of the slave trader Yozgat. Catching the old man's eye, Ghiza Kemal drew him aside. "You have a white female slave for sale," the Pasha said. "I wish to see her."

"I have two, my Lord," said the trader. "One is but a mere slip of a girl, but the other . . . ah, my lord, she would make a splendid concubine. Hips as round as pomegranates, breasts as full as ripe melons . . . the perfect childbearer."

"What color are her eyes?"

"Eyes, my Lord? Why, her eyes are brown."

"And the other?"

"Green, but . . ."

"Bring me the other."

Yozgat stared at him in surprise. "But my Lord, as skinny as she is she would make a most undesirable concubine, and with the awful temper she possesses, she would be totally unsuitable as a servant. She is much too unruly, and quite determined to speak her mind. And what a liar! She has claimed to be everything from a French woman to the wife of an English duke, to the mistress of some desert prince! Can you imagine it? She expects me to believe a story like that!"

The old man dissolved in helpless giggles, but the Pasha was not amused and it was evident in his tone.

"Bring her to me—now!"

Yozgat dared not disobey and disappeared into the building. Several minutes later he emerged, tugging a struggling young woman along behind him.

The old man had not exaggerated, Ghiza Kemal thought, she *was* skinny—hips barely more developed than a boy's and breasts small. But Yozgat was no fool; he had known her value the instant he had seen her flawless skin which was the color of bronze, her dark hair glinting gold in the light, and those eyes—jewel bright, emerald green, wild gypsy eyes tilted in permanent defiance. She was a rare creature, one a man would pay a handsome sum to own.

Yozgat cursed his luck that Ghiza Kemal Pasha had somehow learned of her. Now he would have to let her go for a song! Kemal studied the woman who stood before him, chin tilted up arrogantly, eyes glistening with defiance. Yozgat had gone to great lengths to prepare her for sale. Her magnificent eyes were outlined in kohl, so the green stood out like raw stones. Her lips were stained red, emphasizing the perfect contours of her mouth. Her hair, brushed to a high gloss, rippled over her shoulders and down her back like black silk embroidered with gold threads.

A smile touched Ghiza Kemal's lips. He had come today prepared to pay a moderate price for the woman his man had told him to watch for, never suspecting the treasure that awaited.

"I will take her now," he told Yozgat, his gaze lingering on the woman. "Tomorrow I will send a slave around with what I think she is worth."

The city of Istanbul awoke early. After the dawn prayer the street merchants came down the lanes along with the fruit peddlers, the tinkers, and the yoghurt sellers, all shouting their wares to the awakening city. Noisily came the sherbet sellers, the glasses they carried on the trays strapped to their waists clinking musically. Everywhere was the sound of bustling activity. Yet, despite it all, there was also a certain calm

about the city. Except for the occasional brawling of a group of drunken Janissaries, the atmosphere of Istanbul was conducive to easy living.

Ghiza Kemal Pasha's house was on the shore of the Bosphorous where the daily traffic of trading ships could be viewed from the windows. The house consisted of several pavilions set in a courtyard filled with colorful blooms. It was surrounded by a high wall with locked doors guarded by gatekeepers who sat on big stone benches.

The only part of Istanbul that Juliette had been allowed to see so far was what she saw from the windows. Though she was free to roam about the courtyards and pavilions she was forbidden to venture outside. For the first few days she remained a virtual prisoner of the man who had bought her and whom she had not seen since the day he had taken her out of the slave stalls and brought her here.

On the night of the fourth day he came, without warning, to her chambers and informed her that they were leaving. He was gone before she could question him.

It was past midnight when they boarded Ghiza Kemal's private caique. The long narrow boat, its upcurving prow richly carved and painted, glided noiselessly through the dark waters of the Bosphorous, propelled by twenty oarsmen working in unison. By the time the sun was just beginning to rise, they were approaching the fortress at Tirana. The towering walls of Babiali seemed to pierce the sky.

The Mediterranean coastal fortress of Babiali was an Eden. It was actually made up of several precincts—each with pavilions set among courtyards and gardens—covering a huge area and surrounded by a high impenetrable wall. At the entrance was the main court through which passed trains of camels bringing arms to soldiers and food and goods to the residents of the *serai*, or palace. Some courtyards held mosques, others baths and fountains. Light and airy summer

pavilions stood open to catch the breezes that blew in from the sea.

The interior of the Pasha's residence was divided into apartments whose rooms were masterpieces of elegance. The most private precinct—and the one most strictly segregated from the rest of the *serai*—was the harem, where the women were secluded. The only entrance to it was through two consecutive doors, one of iron, one of brass, whose keys were kept by the Chief Eunuch, the only man other than the Pasha allowed admission to the harem.

The apartment to which Juliette was consigned upon her arrival was no less magnificent than any of the others. All about the walls were divans spread with embroidered hangings and covered with cushions of velvet, silk, and satin. The walls and ceilings were carved and painted, with niches built into the walls to shelve elaborate vases holding summer blossoms. The ceilings, which were high, and the windows, which had no glass, encouraged the cool sea breezes to sweep constantly through the apartment, creating an atmosphere conducive to rest, relaxation, and frivolity.

Juliette decided early that if she were to be a prisoner of this place, she might as well make the best of it—and she did! Each morning, after breakfasting on white cheese, fruit, preserves, and bread, she visited the *hammam*, the bathhouse reserved exclusively for the women of the house.

Here, all around the tiled walls, hot water gushed from copper spouts into marble basins and a eunuch slave splashed water all over her naked body using a small brass bowl. After her bath, she would stretch out upon a marble step to bask in the warm sun streaming in through the open roof.

She lay with her eyes half-closed, a pleasant day-dream floating lazily through her mind, while the strong, nimble hands of the slave worked over her body, rubbing fragrant oils into her skin until it looked like polished bronze. First, while she lay on her

stomach, his fingers worked slowly from her shoulders, across her back to her buttocks, then down the length of each slender thigh. Then, when she turned on her back, his fingers kneaded her breasts, her belly, her thighs, and the place between her thighs that never failed to throb beneath his ministrations. Sometimes, ashamed of the hot red flush that would spread over her body, she would sit up and wave him away, wondering nervously how his touch could feel so much like a man's when he was only part of one.

The most important inhabitants of the harem were the Pasha's three chief concubines—Ghiza Kemal had never taken a wife—who had separate apartments and household slaves. They rarely saw each other except at the baths and relied chiefly on their slaves and hand-maidens for news of the outside world. This was how they learned of the new woman their lord had acquired in Istanbul.

At first they regarded the newcomer with suspicion—she was so unlike them. Her exotic looks, the fiery temper she stubbornly refused to curb were completely alien. But, gradually, as they grew used to her strangeness, they warmed to her, even shared with her the gossip they extracted from their slaves.

Of the three, Juliette liked Akira best for they were about the same age and Akira laughed the easiest. Kehedra was somewhat older, a bit more serious and very pregnant, a condition she was accustomed to since she had already given the Pasha two sons. Eyub, the oldest of the women, whose fertility had ended with her second stillborn child, had adopted the role of mother hen, scolding them when their giggles grew too loud and shaming them for the way they allowed the eunuch slaves to work over their bodies, even Kehedra's swollen one.

"Kemal likes me when I slide through his fingers," Akira would say, dissolving into childish laughter, black eyes sparkling. Though Juliette could not share the girl's incomprehensible adoration of Kemal, she could not help but love her for her youthful gaiety.

It was Akira who showed her how to paint her eyes with kohl and her nails with vermillion, and how to tint her hair with henna so that it shone red in the sunlight. It was Akira who taught her how to get rid of the superfluous hair on her body with a depilatory paste of quicklime and orpiment. Applied with a spatula and removed with the razorsharp edge of a mussle shell, it left Juliette's slender legs sleek and smooth. And it was Akira who, in her delightfully precocious way, would unknowingly let bits of information slip from her lips . . . unaware that Juliette was hoarding it all.

The days passed in lazy elegance. Juliette was leading a pampered existence where everything was done for her, and she was free from the cares of the outside world. But would she ever be free from her own thoughts?

At night she would lie on her cotton-stuffed mattress listening to the gentle sound of the Mediterranean Sea below her window and watching the moon . . . unable to sleep from the rush of memories and apprehensive of what was yet in store for her.

She recalled, with a shudder, the conversation she had had with Kemal on the night they arrived at Tirana from Istanbul. Feeling especially uncooperative, she had gotten her relationship with her new master off to a rather poor start. When he spoke, she ignored him. When he questioned her, she stormed that it was none of his business. She had, at last, succeeded in provoking an angry response from him.

Eyeing her impatiently, he said, "You are very fortunate that I *do* make everything my business. You would also do well to curb your insolent tongue to me when it is I alone who have the power to return you to the Duke, your husband. Yes," he added in answer to her look of surprise, "that old slave trader may not have believed your story, but I do. Particularly since it was I who arranged the transaction that brought your husband's ship to these shores. I know not how *you* came to be aboard that ship. I was assured there would be no passengers although I suppose it hardly matters

now. What I am more interested in is your association with Ramir Tabori."

He said this last slowly, watching her closely, deliberately, to test her and was gratified to see a flicker of alarm in those green eyes.

Instantly, Juliette was on guard. "I was his prisoner as I am yours!" she protested.

"Perhaps," Kemal said, but her eyes had told him something else. Had she been Tabori's lover? If so, perhaps he could use her to get his hands on him. That rebel scoundrel had been a thorn in his side too long. Perhaps, with the woman as bait, he could finally capture that devil and put an end to him.

Juliette watched him uneasily; it was not hard to deduce what he must be thinking. To change the subject and draw his attention away from Ramir, she asked, "Are you going to send me back to my husband?"

"That depends," Kemal answered. "I have not attained my position by allowing opportunities to slip away from me, you know. I could perhaps offer you to him for ransom. I am certain he would pay a handsome sum to have you back. On the other hand . . ."

His words trailed off as he considered the alternative. If this woman's husband were a Frenchman or an American, he would not have hesitated to use her as bait for Tabori. But her husband was an Englishman and Kemal had need of British affiliations. The matter seemed to be decided for him. He would just have to find another way to get his hands on Tabori.

"I suppose," he went on, "it would be undiplomatic of me to offer you to him for ransom, so I shall offer you . . . shall we say . . . free of charge. My only condition is that he come for you himself. I cannot spare the escort at the moment—not with Tabori's rebels creating such a nuisance." He leveled a sidelong look at her. "It is only a matter of time before I capture Ramir, you know. You might as well tell me what you know. Perhaps I can even be persuaded to go easy on him."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Juliette said.

Kemal sighed. "You will find that I am not a man to be put off. I shall have the answers I seek from you, one way or another. We have much time to spend together. After all, England is a long way off and it will be some time before your husband arrives. You will find that I am a patient man, but you will also learn not to try that patience. You will also learn to accomodate me whenever I have need of you."

Juliette's eyes flashed. Could he mean what she thought he meant?

"Why do you look so shocked?" he asked in amusement. "It is my right for having purchased you."

"B-but . . . my husband . . . he would never allow you to . . ."

"He will never know," Kemal interrupted, "for I will not tell him and certainly *you* will not." His black eyes narrowed as he spoke, and the menacing look she saw there told her not to argue . . . not if she valued her life.

As the weeks slipped by, the peaceful feeling instilled in Juliette by the life at Babiali gave way to nervous apprehension as she thought that, at any moment, Trevor Kenmare might come walking through the door.

It had been so many long months and so much had changed. *She* had changed. If ever there had been any doubt in her mind there was none now: she knew she could never go back to him. No matter how he might try to intimidate her, how harshly Lord Alfred might threaten her, she would never go back. She did not belong with Trevor; she never had. She belonged . . . where?

The question forever plagued her, and the answer continued to evade her. Where did she belong? Back in Paris with Tante Enjolé? She laughed bitterly at the ridiculous idea of reverting to the innocent, naive little flirt she had once been. She was far from innocent now.

Where, then? Out in the desert with Ramir? The

thought of him brought a pang of regret. Where was he now? Had he ever discovered what had become of her? Was he out searching for her, or was his commitment to his cause more important than she could ever be to him? Worse . . . had he returned to the dark-eyed Aleppa's bed?

A soft moan escaped her. He had awakened her passions like—

Another pang, this time to the core of her heart piercing it like a dagger. The memory of dazzling blue eyes flooded over her. Oh! Would she *ever* forget? She would never see him again, she knew that, but she could not resign herself to that disheartening fact. She grew more restless, hot-tempered, and irritable as the weeks went by. She even spoke harshly to her slaves, regretting it afterwards and giving them expensive baubles she pulled from her closets.

As Juliette became a functioning part of the microcosm of the *serai*, she acquired her own little army of slaves who swore their allegiance to her and did her bidding eagerly . . . particularly one called Nevsehir. He could not have been much more than a boy, and his softly stroking hands and kneading fingers were, naturally, just a little bit curious.

It was all Nevsehir would ever know of a woman's flesh, Juliette thought. Feeling sorry for the boy, she encouraged him to explore her perfect body. To Nevsehir, whose spirit and virility had been aborted on the day of his castration, she was the most vibrant thing in the *serai*—and the *serai* was all his small world would ever consist of. He loved to tell her amusing stories to make her green eyes sparkle. By now, she had learned enough of his language to converse freely with him, so that his own dark eyes danced with laughter at her stories.

Much of their time together was spent in silly laughter or quiet conversation, as Nevsehir rubbed patchouli oil into her skin. When she was certain in her heart that he could be trusted with her innermost feelings, Juliette told him her story, all of it . . . of how

she had come to be at Tirana, of the men who had taken her, of the one she still longed for.

In his soft, hesitant, shy voice, Nevsehir told her how it was with him, with so much of the man swelling his young breast and his manly seed hopelessly cut from his body, rendering him only half a man for the rest of his life.

She could tell by his voice and the look in his eyes that it hurt him a great deal to talk about it. The day he revealed those private, suppressed feelings to her was the day she made him her lover. In the days that followed she told him over and over again with her own body how slight, how insignificant, his deficiency was in her eyes. Doing so she changed a sixteen-year-old boy into a man and gained a loyal, loving slave for life.

One thing Juliette supposed she was thankful for was Kemal's frequent absences, for he was always tending to matters about the province or placating the Sultan in Istanbul. But when he was at Babiali, he would visit her apartment three and four times a day, taking her in the fashion of a general conquering the enemy.

He was an insatiable lover whose lovemaking resembled an efficient military maneuver. She neither resisted nor pretended to respond, and Kemal seemed to accept her indifference, content to use her until the day her husband came to claim her.

Early one morning, after dawn prayer, he appeared at her room and ordered her to remove her robe—quickly, as his troops were in formation outside the palace walls awaiting his leadership on a practice maneuver.

When he was finished with her, he dressed at once and announced, "Your husband arrived at Babiali today. I will be dining with him this evening. It is not proper for a woman to dine with the men but, under the circumstances, I think you should join us. One of the slaves will come for you."

He walked to the door, paused to look back to her. "I don't think I need remind you that there will be no mention of our arrangement. The English can be so

unreasonable at times, there is no sense upsetting him." His voice was soft, almost casual, but the threatening look in his eyes warned her to obey.

Juliette turned away from him in disgust, but he was not quite finished with her. "I have not had the time, unfortunately, to question you further about the man they call El Shahin. No doubt you could tell me much more than you pretend to know, but I am not worried. I will see him hanging from the tower of Babiali without your help. You are lucky that the ship bearing my message to England found favorable winds and made it here faster than I had thought it would."

With that he snapped to attention, gave her a curt nod, pivoted and marched out of the room.

Juliette watched from the window as he strode across the courtyard to where a groom held his horse. She watched him swing into the saddle and gallop out the gates, but her thoughts were not on Kemal.

A faint shudder ripped down her spine and she drew away from the window, wrapping her arms around herself.

Trevor . . . Just thinking his name was like a cold hand touching her heart.

Chapter 28

She dressed in red silk trousers beneath a gold embroidered caftan. Her nails and lips were painted red, and the slant of her emerald eyes was emphasized by the lines of kohl she painted on the upper and lower lids. Inspecting herself in the mirror, Juliette judged herself ready to meet her husband, confident that her costume and makeup would annoy Trevor extremely.

She was glad it was Nevsehir who came to escort her to the Pasha's chambers. But even his reassuring presence could not soften the shock that awaited her. A small cry froze in her throat when a man standing at the window as she entered turned to look at her—not with cold brown eyes, but with laughing blue ones.

Nevsehir felt her go rigid and glanced at her questioningly, but she was quickly ushered into the room and the door was closed behind her.

Juliette felt as though she had walked into the lion's den. She took a deep breath to gain the composure she desperately needed to get through the evening, but her mind reeled. My God! Christian! What was he doing here?

Kemal had been watching her. Now he asked, "Aren't you going to say hello to your husband? He has traveled a long way to see you."

Her throat had gone bone dry. "Of course . . . I . . . that is . . ." Reluctantly she turned to look at . . . *him*.

In two quick strides he was beside her. Placing his

arm about her waist, he pulled her close and covered her mouth with a quick, but thorough, kiss. Then he released her and stood back, smiling.

"You don't seem very happy to see me, my dear. And after all we have been to each other."

Green eyes blazed at him. Even now he had the audacity to taunt her.

"I'm just a bit surprised, that's all. I had not expected to see you again."

Ghiza Kemal came forward, a goblet in each hand. Handing one to Juliette, he said, "But I told you that I was sending for him, so surely you knew you would see him again." Turning to Christian Youngblood he remarked, with a short laugh, "Perhaps too many lazy days at the baths have affected her memory."

"Yes, but—" Juliette began. A quick warning from Christian's blue eyes silenced her.

But Kemal sensed her uneasiness. "But?" he prompted. "But—what? You certainly are behaving strangely this evening. You do claim to be the Duchess of Amherst, do you not?"

A stiff nod satisfied him. "And you are married to the Duke of Amherst . . . so, is this man then not the Duke of Amherst?"

Juliette looked away. My God, what kind of trap was he setting for her? Was Christian Youngblood in on it too?

"Well?" Kemal demanded. "Is he or is he not the Duke of Amherst?"

Forcing the goblet to her lips, Juliette drank quickly to fortify herself. "Yes," she said. "Yes, he certainly is the Duke of Amherst."

Luckily, they were called to dinner and she was spared any further interrogation. Throughout the meal, Kemal and Christian conversed politely, each man trying to hide the fact that he did not like the other. Between them, Juliette sat rigid and alert, her mind whirling with unanswered questions, above all: What was Christian doing here, pretending to be her husband? They were coming to the end of the meal when

one of the guards entered and whispered something into Kemal's ear.

Frowning, the Pasha rose to his feet. "You will excuse me," he said curtly, "I must leave you for a while." He marched from the room, leaving Juliette and Christian glaring at each other across the table.

Christian spoke first, shaking his head. "I suppose it's just my fate to meet up with you at every turn, although for the life of me, I can't figure out how you managed to get yourself into this one."

Juliette's outrage was growing by the minute. At the sound of his mocking voice, it surfaced. It seemed as if no time at all had elapsed since their last encounter. Here was that same arrogant smile, that mocking voice, those devil-blue eyes making her shiver in spite of herself. Right now they seemed to be laughing at her.

With tight control of her temper, she responded, "I have not gotten myself into any of these situations. Let me remind you . . . *your Grace* . . . that if I had known at the beginning the truth. . . . You are certainly adept at leaving things unsaid. As it was, I had to find out from Stephan who you really are. The same way I found out from Lord Alfred that it was you who killed my father! Deception appears to be your specialty. I just wonder how cleverly—and for what reasons—you are deceiving Kemal. Just remember, one word from my lips will expose you for the imposter you are and you will not leave this place alive!"

"Imposter?" Christian raised an eyebrow at her. "But you said yourself that I am the Duke of Amherst."

"But *not* my husband, although only Allah knows your reasons for pretending to be!"

Christian sighed and observed, "You've been here too long. You even sound like one of them. It looks like I've come just in time to rescue you."

"You always appear to be rescuing me," Juliette said angrily, "only to get me into deeper trouble. You are nothing but a self-serving, egotistical, arrogant brute of a man, and I hate you!"

He watched her with amusement. So, she still had the old fire in her, thank God. He would have been sorely disappointed to find it extinguished. He wondered how it was possible for her to have grown more ravishing. She had gained a few pounds which was all to the good. Her skin was golden and flawless, and her incredible vixen eyes sparkled like rare jewels . . . spitting haughty defiance at him. She was even more magnificent than he remembered. Instantly it all came back to him, all the long months of thinking of nothing but her, missing her, craving her. -

She had moved restlessly to the open window where she stood with her face bathed in starlight. Her eyes now were the color of a midnight forest, her lips like the petals of a summer rose. He wanted to taste those lips, to see those eyes flutter closed in response to his touch, but something stopped him from making the move. Something he had thought about all these months until he thought he would go mad with it. Here, with her standing so close . . . so very close . . . to him, the thought obsessed him and caused his muscles to tighten involuntarily and his anger to rise.

How many men? How many other men had her . . . had tasted those lips, looked into those eyes, lost themselves inside of her? One man's name came immediately to mind: Ramir Tabori.

Christian tensed and turned away, filled with jealousy. "I hate to disappoint you, my dear, but rescuing you is not the main purpose of my visit. I'm here to get information. So, now, let's get down to business before that Turkish monkey comes back."

He began firing questions at her. How many guards were at the gate? How many entrances into the palace. How often was the Pasha away?

But Juliette refused to cooperate, and Christian quickly lost patience with her.

"Damn it!" he swore, "this is important! Now I want answers! It will help Tabori to know all he—"

Her astonished gasp stopped him. "Ramir? How

do you . . . I mean, how do you know Ramir Tabori?" She was stunned.

"I'll tell you about that later," he replied. "There's no time now . . . Kemal may be back any minute and I need information."

She would not accept any postponement. "Do you know Ramir or not?" she demanded. She stood chin up, eyes blazing defiance, waiting for an answer.

Christian obliged with a sneer. "Yes, I know him, but apparently not as well as you do."

Juliette inhaled sharply. "How dare you presume—"

"I'm not presuming anything, or are you going to deny that he was your lover?" He grasped her roughly by the arm, forcing her to look at him. "Was he? Was Tabori your lover?"

Pulling herself free, she sprang away, then whirled to face him. "How dare you question me about that! You disappeared from my life over a year ago in England and now you turn up here demanding to know about something that is none of your business! By what right do you—"

"What right?" he interrupted, his look menacing. "I'll tell you by what right. I risked my neck coming here to get you! That gives me the right to ask any damned questions I want!"

"You're so sure of yourself, aren't you? How smug and arrogant will you be when Trevor comes marching through that door?"

With a contemptuous snort he replied, "If Trevor shows up, I'll have cause to worry, but he won't. Ramir's men intercepted Kemal's message. So, my love, I'm afraid that if you wish to be rescued from the Pasha, it will have to be by me."

Juliette's head was beginning to spin. Pressing her fingers to her temples, she drew back from him. "My head . . . I must lie down. I . . ."

Turning, she fled from the room. She just had to get away for a few moments by herself. God, her head hurt so. If only she could have some of Trevor's medi-

cine . . . The kitchen, perhaps there was some in the kitchen. She'd ask Martha . . . Dear God, what was she thinking? For a moment she had imagined she was back in England. It must be the shock of seeing Christian again.

Damn him! Damn him for that unnerving way he had of looking right through her! On her way back to her rooms she cursed him vehemently. She was still heaping vile curses on his black soul when the sound of voices caught her attention.

She would have ignored them had she not recognized them. Strange . . . to hear that one particular voice in this house. For the moment, her aching head was forgotten. Drawing closer to the room the voices were coming from, she peeked in cautiously to verify the identity of the speaker. One quick look was enough to convince her that something was wrong . . . dangerously wrong.

Ishak Bey stood with Ghiza Kemal their heads bent in quiet conversation. Straining, she could just barely make out what they were saying. What she heard made her tremble. She listened only a moment, but it was long enough to understand that the two men were plotting the destruction of El Shahin.

Juliette bit her lip hard to stifle a sob. Her blood ran cold.

"Nevsehir," Juliette began. "Nevsehir," she repeated softly, "I need your help . . . desperately. But if you are discovered assisting me, it will mean your life."

She wanted him to understand the danger, but all he saw was the plea in her green eyes, all he heard was the desperation in her voice. He did not hesitate to demonstrate the loyalty he'd sworn her.

"Tell me," he said earnestly, "you know I will help you."

She told him quickly, knowing that he would never betray her. Together they worked out a plan which in all probability would never work. There was no time to

calculate the odds, but as they stripped off their clothes and she slipped quickly into his, each knew the cards were stacked against them.

Standing at the mirror, Juliette ruthlessly rubbed the kohl from her eyelids and the vermillion from her lips. "There are some trousers over there," she gestured hastily. "Put those on with the gray tunic. Now, are you sure you can get over the wall to the courtyard below? It's a steep drop."

He assured her that he would have no trouble fashioning a rope and shimmying down.

"And the guards?"

"Do not worry," he said, "they know me. I come and go frequently."

Tucking her mass of dark hair up under Nevsehir's felt hat, she remarked dryly, "In the middle of the night?"

Nevsehir shrugged and grinned.

At the door Juliette paused to take a deep breath and cast one final glance over her shoulder at Nevsehir. Then, opening the door, she slipped out.

She was careful to keep her eyes cast down as she swept by the Chief Eunuch, her heart pounding furiously lest he discover the deception. But the masquerade worked. The Chief Eunuch reached into his pocket for his ring of keys and unlocked first the brass door, then the iron one to allow her to pass.

Once beyond the harem precinct, Juliette sped down the long corridors, going from pavilion to pavilion, seeking the one where Christian Youngblood slept. She found him in the northern quarter of the *serai*—farthest from the gate at which Nevsehir swore he would be waiting with a horse all saddled and ready.

In the hazy moonlight filtering through the pavilion, she could make out his handsome profile as he slept. Creeping closer, she could hear the steady rise and fall of his breathing, and reached out her hand timidly to awaken him.

Just then a hand grasped her by the wrist in a move

that was so rapid she barely saw it. In the next instant she found herself spun around, the glistening tip of a knife touching her throat.

In morbid fear, Juliette went rigid. A strong twist of her arm behind her back tore a cry from her throat and she was once again spun around sharply, this time to face her attacker.

His complexion was as white as hers, but his shock was the greater when he discovered just who was creeping around his bed in the middle of the night.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he whispered angrily. "And why are you dressed like a slave?"

He released her and passed his hand through his thick black hair. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

It took Juliette some moments to cease trembling and regain her composure, but then she lost no time telling him about the conversation she had overheard between Ghiza Kemal and Ishak Bey.

"That bastard!" Christian swore. Hurriedly he reached for his clothes. He dressed silently, slipping into his wide-sleeved shirt and tight-fitting breeches, pulling on polished black-leather boots up over his legs.

"I've got to get out of here," he said, reaching beneath his pillow and pulling out his pistol.

"A horse is waiting by the south gate. It has been arranged."

He glanced at her sharply, thrusting the pistol into his belt. "Made yourself a friend at the palace, huh?"

"Yes," Juliette snapped back at him, letting him know she did not like his tone. "The kind you would know nothing about."

For a moment his eyes stared into hers. Looking away finally, he said, "Can you get back to your room by yourself?"

"What are you talking about!" she cried. "I am going with you!"

"The hell you are!"

"But . . ."

"Forget it, the answer is no! I've got to make it on foot across the palace grounds to the south gate where this friend of yours *might* have a horse waiting. From there I'll be lucky if I get out of the palace compound without being seen. After that there is over a hundred miles of desert waiting for me crawling with Kemal's men. No, I go alone!"

Bending to hide his dagger in his boot, he issued his orders. "Go back to your room and get out of that ridiculous outfit. In the morning try to appear just a little bit disappointed that your husband had to leave so suddenly in the middle of the night."

He turned to leave but a few whispered words from Juliette stopped him.

"I have ordered Nevsehir to sound the alarm should you appear at the gate without me." Smiling, she added triumphantly, "You have no choice but to take me with you. I am your only passage out of here."

"I hope your slave is prepared to die," remarked Christian threateningly, "because if he sounds that alarm, I'll kill him."

"He has pledged his word as willingly as his life."

Christian appraised her calculatingly, then began to smile. "You've got your slaves well trained, haven't you. I should have known. Well, come along then, but keep quiet and do as I say!"

With a firm grip on her arm he dragged her along behind him, pushing her roughly into the shadows every time he thought he heard something. Stealthily they made their way across the interlocking courtyards of the *serai*, hugging the stone walls and disappearing into the shrubbery at the sound of footsteps. Once she stumbled, suffering not only a menacing look from Christian, but a painful tightening of his grip on her waist. Somehow they made it to the south gate without being seen, to where Juliette had said a horse would be waiting.

Racing to the wall and hugging it closely, they inched along the ground to the gate. With firm pressure on her

shoulder, Christian silently ordered Juliette to remain where she was while he moved closer to peer through the iron grating.

He stared into the darkness beyond the gate, searching. There in the shadows to the left, partially hidden by a thorny bush, he could make out a horse, a slight figure by its side.

Darting back, Christian signaled for Juliette. Taking her hand, he pulled her behind him through the unlocked gate and half-dragged her to the waiting horse.

"You are lucky," Nevsehir whispered hurriedly to Juliette as she ran up to him. "The moon hides behind the clouds now. She will conceal your flight." Putting out his hand, he helped her into the saddle in front of Christian, who was already mounted.

Juliette was unable to let go of the slave's hand. "Nevsehir . . ." She whispered his name, expressing in that one word her thanks, her friendship, her love.

The boy held her slim hand tightly in his. Suddenly, there was no more time. Before Nevsehir could say, "Allah be with you," Christian Youngblood had dug his heels savagely into the horse, urging the animal forward. Soon they were galloping away from Tirana.

They made their way down from the rocky pinnacles surrounding Babiali quickly. Then, with the towering walls of the *serai* overhead, Christian turned the horse's head toward the desert that lay to the southeast.

The ground reverberated with the steady pounding of the horse's hooves as they galloped across the dark land. In the next moment, a sound exploded behind them like the crack of a lightening bolt.

Juliette screamed at the sound of the shot, but they kept on going. She knew what had happened. Hot tears rushed from her eyes, slid down her cheeks. Even the painful constriction of Youngblood's arm about her waist was forgotten in her overwhelming grief.

Nevsehir had sworn his loyalty . . . and had paid with his life.

The moon emerged from the clouds to light their way. They rode, never slowing their pace, far into the night. Finally, after they had been riding for hours, he pulled sharply on the reins and brought the exhausted animal to a halt.

Dropping to the ground, Christian pulled a weary Juliette down beside him. Her legs trembled and she would have slipped to the ground had he not been there to catch her. Lifting her effortlessly into his arms, he carried her off to the side and sat her against a boulder for support while he returned to the horse and began to remove the saddle.

Juliette opened tired eyes and, struggling to her feet, stumbled back to him. "What are you doing?" She pulled at his hands to stop him. "We can't stay here! Kemal's soldiers are everywhere! They'll find us!"

"We can't go on," Christian said, tossing the saddle to the ground. "The horse needs rest and so do we, we've got the worst part of the desert ahead of us. If we don't rest now, we won't make it."

She stared at him in horror, all weariness gone. "You expect to cross the desert during the day? We'll burn alive! We've got to keep going! We must cross the worst part by night!"

He was in no mood to listen to her. "I told you we'll do this my way, damn it, and I say we can't ask this animal to go a step further!"

He turned back to the horse and began removing the bridle, speaking over his shoulder. "Your little desert rat gave me a few pointers about surviving in the desert." Then, mockingly, he added, "I'll bet he taught you a thing or two too."

Juliette shot a deadly look at his turned back, but she remained silent, not wishing to give him the satisfaction of knowing he had provoked her. In silence she watched as he hobbled the horse's forelegs so the animal could move around to forage but not get very far.

"No," he remarked, as he turned back to her and

read her curiosity, "I did not learn how to do *that* from Tabori. In fact, it's one of the things I taught him. I learned it from the Indians."

The simple statement, uttered so matter-of-factly, startled Juliette. Suddenly she realized how little she truly knew about this man. "You have lived among the savages?" she breathed, like an awe-struck child.

Christian laughed heartily. "They're hardly that, but yes, I lived among them. It was only a few months, but I learned some valuable lessons."

How many other things did she not know about him? He was a British duke who had lived among the American savages, who was deeply committed to the cause of American independence, who sailed the high seas plundering vessels like a common pirate, and who knew what else!

"Where do you actually live?" The question came out before she could stop it. She expected an irritable response, but to her surprise, he smiled.

"I spend most of my time aboard the *Rebel*," he replied, "but there is a place I go back to whenever I can. It's in Massachusetts, west of Boston, a little place called Youngstown. I've got a house there that used to belong to . . . well, to a friend of mine. It's mine now, if there's anything left of it that is."

"Why should there not be?"

"There's still a war going on back there, my love, or have you forgotten?"

She had! She had forgotten all about it! Somehow, it seemed that the only struggle in the world was the one between Ramir and Kemal. Yet she had left a much more violent struggle behind.

Christian was oblivious to her reaction. He went on speaking as he untied the pack that had been strapped to the saddle. "You should see the place . . . you wouldn't believe such beauty possible. The hills in Massachusetts, that's something you'll see nowhere else on earth, and the woods are even denser than in the English countryside. You can smell the trees miles offshore as you approach from the sea. Yes, I suppose

that's the one place on this earth I call home—next to the *Rebel*, that is. Someday I hope to go back."

The tenderness in his voice changed quickly to pleasure when he unrolled the pack that had been tied behind the saddle and pulled out a flask of wine.

"Look at this, your little friend figured we'd be cold out in the desert at night so he packed this."

Juliette fought back a sob at the mention of Nevsehir. All of a sudden, the pretty picture Christian had painted of his home in America vanished. She was left with the dismal reality of where they were, what had happened, and how dreadfully tired she was. She began to shiver and could not stop her teeth from clattering. Christian was at her side instantly.

"Drink this," he ordered, tilting the flask to her lips.

She had no strength to resist when he held her head back and forced her to drink more than she wanted. In no time the tingling warmth of the wine began to spread through her limbs. She struggled to remain awake as Christian spread the blanket over the ground. Her body was tired, her mind ached, and the wine was lulling her into a dreamy state. She was barely aware of Christian moving beside her, taking her hand, guiding her to the blanket, and pulling her down beside him. She was not sure how he came to be kissing her, or how his strong arms found their way around her. Opening her eyes, she gasped to find herself naked, the moonlight skimming across her bare skin.

"No," she protested weakly as he pressed her thighs apart with his naked legs and placed himself on top of her. He was kissing her, his tongue rediscovering all the secret places of her mouth while his hands moved across her breasts, caressing her nipples until they ached for more.

No longer was he the man he had revealed to her before when he spoke of his home in Massachusetts. No longer were they in a strange land, lying naked beneath an alien moon. Through his kisses Juliette found herself transported back in time. Suddenly, they were back aboard the *Rebel* and he was having his

arrogant way with her, his caresses turning an innocent girl into a passion-seeking woman. Then, without warning, his stroking fingers and probing tongue brought her to another place, to a small blacksmith's shed, to the day he had turned her hatred of him into love, her curiosity into desire.

The wine of desire was flowing through her veins now. She possessed neither the strength nor the will to stop him, blushed at her own voice urging him on, daring him, challenging him to make her passions soar as only he had the power to do.

He answered her challenge with a fire of his own, burying his face in her hair, his breath coming in short gasps as her fingers found him and held him prisoner in her grasp. She stroked and caressed him until he was hopelessly trapped in the web of his own passion.

"Juliette . . ." he groaned. "God how I've wanted you!"

He forced himself between her parted thighs and they clung to each other as though they were the only living creatures on earth, each giving, taking, demanding . . . until they could ask for no more.

Chapter 29

By the time the sun was straight up in the sky, it was obvious that they could go no further. Juliette gave Christian an I-told-you-so look over her shoulder, but the tender lover of the night before had reverted back to his usual bad humor.

"Do you have any better ideas?" he snapped angrily.

"Kervan Kiran," she replied. "That's the Turkish name for the morning star. It means Caravan Breaking because it marks the dispersal of the caravan at dawn to wait out the daytime. They travel only by night, you know, and if you had listened to me in the first place, you . . ."

But a painfully tight squeeze at her waist stopped her. Sighing, Juliette made an effort to curb her tongue. It would do no good, she reasoned, to keep arguing with each other when each other was all they had at the moment.

"We might as well stay over there for the rest of the day," she said, pointing to a clump of scrawny shrubs. They offered scant protection from the glaring sun but there was nothing else in sight.

"It will have to do," he agreed grudgingly. "Any other bits of desert wisdom up your sleeve?"

"Enough to get us across the worst part."

Christian swung out of the saddle and reached to help her down.

She went immediately to a hostile-looking plant. "See this plant with the sharp thorns? If we didn't have

water in our pack, we could dig up the roots and suck on them. They're bitter, but they would keep us alive. Ramir taught me that. You'd be surprised at the things I've learned."

She sounded proud in a childlike way, and it annoyed Christian, particularly when he thought of the man she had learned it all from.

"Judging from your performance last night, my love, I'd say you've learned a lot more than just how to dig up roots," he commented bitterly.

"You resent Ramir for that, don't you?" Juliette challenged him. "Why? You have never wanted anything from me other than my body, so what difference does it make to you what he taught me? As I recall, you did not seem to mind it last night."

He scowled angrily. "Is that what you think? That I want only your body? Damn you woman, you're impossible!"

"You have left me with little else to think, except that you seem to be under the mistaken impression that you own me simply because you deflowered me, that you can slip in and out of my life demanding that I sleep only with you. Your arrogance is appalling, Christian!"

"I made no such demands on you. Why should I care who you sleep with?"

"You may not have actually said it, but I can certainly read it in your eyes. You cannot bear the thought that I gave myself willingly to Ramir, or that I am returning to him!" She threw in that last without thinking. Yes, she was returning, but was it to Ramir? Even she had not yet decided.

"Tell me," she continued, disregarding the way his eyes had darkened warningly, "would it upset you as much to know that Kemal taught me a thing or two also?"

His sun-bronzed face paled. "Kemal? Why, that . . ."

Juliette was unprepared for the extent of his fury, nor quite ready—or willing—to answer the questions he fired at her about her relationship with the Pasha.

"What does it matter?" she cried. "Yes, he had me, and no, I did not enjoy it! But there was nothing I could do about it! Without actually saying it, he made it clear what would happen to me if I did not do as he said."

Christian's face revealed nothing as he listened to her story, but inside he cursed the man who had used her this way, secretly vowing revenge against the Pasha. Kemal would suffer for this! Damn his black soul to eternal hell, he would pay dearly for this!

"Look, let's rest here for the rest of the day. We'll travel only by night . . . your way. I promise. Come now, come sit down with me." Gently, he led her to the only bit of shade. The air was so overwhelmingly hot that even speaking was difficult, and they soon fell silent. Juliette at last fell asleep but Christian could not.

He watched her as she slept. She lay beside him, her tunic sticking to her body, a glossy sheen of perspiration on her face. She looked so childlike and innocent one would never guess that behind that peaceful rosebud smile lay the wild soul of a gypsy.

Even with her face streaked with dust and dressed in a slave's garments she was an alluring creature. Even in sleep she teased him, firing his passion merely by lying with her legs unconsciously, but seductively, spread apart, her thick black lashes fanned over her cheeks, lips moist and parted as if waiting.

He desired her again, and imagined the way her eyes would flutter open at his touch, the way her mouth would open to receive his. Reaching over to brush a strand of hair gently from her face, he pulled his hand back quickly when she jumped up, her eyes wide open.

"Do you hear it? Do you?"

Christian looked at her in bewilderment. "Hear what? I don't hear anything. You must have been dreaming, but now that you're awake . . ."

He reached for her, but she pushed him away.

"Not now Christian, listen! Don't you hear it?" Then, jumping to her feet, she pointed into the distance. "Look, Christian, look!"

Shielding his eyes from the sun, he squinted out into

the desert stretching endless miles ahead of them. "What is it? I don't see . . ." But wait, there was something out there! He waited only a moment before all reflexes went into action.

"Come on, we're getting out of here!" He grabbed her arm and tried to pull her away, but she fought him.

"No!" she cried. "No! You don't understand!"

"You're crazy!" he shouted. "It's Kemal's men! If we don't get out of here, they'll—"

"No! It's not Kemal! It's Ramir! Dear God, it's Ramir!"

She pulled free and ran out into the desert, waving her arms frantically and shouting.

Christian raced after her. "You're insane! That's not Ramir!"

"It is!" she insisted. "It is! I would know that white horse anywhere! Look, can't you see it?"

Again Christian stared out at the dust cloud rising from the desert floor. This time he saw what she had seen. In the swirling dust he could make out the lines of a white Arabian stallion and its rider.

But any man could sit astride a snow-white horse. It was not until he recognized the staff with the guidon of El Shahin that he released his hold on Juliette and began to signal along with her.

The approaching army looked to be just minutes away, but they both knew that distance on the desert could be deceiving. It was several hours before they were greeted by a jubilant Ramir Tabori and his rebel army.

Juliette ran to Ramir as he dismounted, throwing herself into his open arms, smothering his face with kisses, bringing a frown to Christian Youngblood's face as he watched in growing anger. He was about to break up the touching reunion when a familiar voice called out to him:

"*Mon ami! Mon Ami*, you are alive! We thought . . . ah! What does it matter what we thought! You are safe now—both of you!"

Stephan d'Ajasson jumped from his saddle and ran

to them; placing his strong hands on Juliette's slim waist, he hoisted her into the air above his head.

"*Mon petite*, it is me, Stephan! Have you no kisses for me too?"

Again Christian Youngblood was forced to stand by and watch a man take her into his arms and plant over-friendly kisses on her lips. Enough was enough!

Striding up to them, he said, "If you three are through getting reacquainted, I think we had better get down to business."

"Ah, Christian, always you are so serious," Stephan teased him. "I have not see *ma petite cousine* in so many long months, I am just saying hello to her."

"You've said your hello's," replied Christian crossly. "And what's this cousin business? Since when are you two related?"

With a playful wink at Juliette, Stephan laughed, "That, *mon ami*, is a secret between me and Juliette, eh *ma petite*?"

Ramir Tabori watched the exchange between Juliette and Stephan with amusement, but he found Christian's reaction puzzling. Stephan had confessed to Ramir that he and Christian did indeed know the woman Ramir had spoken of in such grand terms, but the Frenchman had not confided the extent of their relationship, or the circumstances surrounding it. But the look in the captain's blue eyes as he watched Stephan embracing Juliette and that in the Frenchman's gray eyes as he looked at her, told Ramir there was more to this strange triangle than met the eye.

"My friends," Ramir spoke up, "Now that everyone is safe and sound and my Juliette has been returned to me, we must concentrate on the matters at hand. We cannot stay here in the open. We must find shelter. Come . . ."

Drawing Juliette possessively to his side, he led her to his horse.

"But Ramir," she began, as he hoisted her into the saddle and mounted up behind her, "how did you know where to find us? How did you know?"

"Later," he answered, urging the stallion forward. "Later I will tell you all about it. Right now I am eager to find a place to make camp. My men are tired, and I, my love, I am hungry for you."

By dusk they were all safe in their tents with food and drink in their bellies. But long after the other tents grew dark, the torches in El Shahin's glowed bright, casting upon the felt walls the shadows of three men and one woman. By the time the moon rose, Juliette had the answers to the countless questions tugging at her since they had met Ramir.

She had told him of her discovery at Babiali, expecting to see fire in Ramir's dark eyes on learning of Ishak Bey's betrayal. But Ramir seemed to take it all in stride.

"Yes, I know all about that."

"B-but . . . how?"

"Aleppa told me."

Juliette could not hide her astonishment. Aleppa had confessed her own treachery? It was just too incredible!

Surprisingly, Ramir felt little malice toward Aleppa. "She could not help herself," he said in her defense. "In spite of what she did to me, I know it was not out of hatred or vengeance. On the contrary, she claims to love me, and I must confess, I do believe her." He sighed deeply and shook his head in dismay. "Unfortunately, Aleppa's love is misguided. She is simply too greedy for pretty things. The fault is mine, I suppose, for I should have known the jeopardy her particular weakness could put me into, if the right person took advantage of her fondness for gifts." He spoke out of genuine sadness, and Juliette wondered what breed of man he was. Even Ishak Bey's betrayal stirred no bitterness in him. "I have suspected him for a long time. My only error was in misjudging his desire for Aleppa. I should never underestimate a man's desire for a woman." As he spoke, his eyes turned toward Juliette. "I have felt such desire myself."

Truly he was an amazing man, she thought, one who

possessed the rare ability to understand—even forgive—another's terrible weaknessess. He was a warrior, a killer of men, and yet there was nothing brutal or harsh about him. He was a gentle, considerate, quietly intelligent man—qualities which made Juliette wonder if she would not be better off remaining with him. Surely he loved her and would take care of her always, and she would not have to put up with emotional outbursts and unreasonable anger. Everything about him attested to qualities rare in a man—humility, devotion to God, tenderness, patience . . . all the things that made him a perfect lover, a valued companion, a trusted ally. Beneath it all was the imposing presence of royalty, for even in his Bedouin garb, he was undeniably every inch a prince.

While the men talked long into the night, Juliette fantasized about what it would be like as Ramir's wife—as a Sultan's wife, for Ramir would one day sit on the throne, of that she was positive. She knew she could be content with him, bring his heirs into the world, and yet . . .

Deep in her heart remained one disturbing objection, one indisputable obstacle to any future with Ramir Tabori. No matter how content she might be with him, she would never be truly happy. Hesitantly, she sought out Christian Youngblood and shuddered to find his blue eyes focused intently on her. Damn those eyes that would haunt her each day of her life!

The dismal truth was that she was hopelessly in love with him. Certain of it now, Juliette was more determined than ever to keep it from him. She would not let him trample her pride by toying with her love! He was a reckless, arrogant man who was too casual about his commitments; the kind of man who took what he wanted the way he had taken her virginity and then her love. To him she was nothing more than an outlet for his lust! Love him? Yes, damn it, she did! But it was against her will and her better judgment. She would die before she'd ever admit it, least of all to him!

Suddenly he was standing before her, a devilish

gleam dancing in his eyes as though he could read her thoughts.

"What's the matter, my sweet?" he asked mockingly, sitting down crosslegged beside her. "Are you sorry I rescued you from your Pasha? Do you still wish you were back at the *serai* being stroked by a eunuch slave?"

Haughtily Juliette replied, "If you expect me to thank you, Christian Youngblood, don't count on it! And as a matter of fact, yes, I was enjoying myself there. I was hardly worried; I knew it would be only a matter of time before Ramir came for me." She said his name proudly. Frowning, Christian replied, "I see. You'll be pleased to learn, in that case, that once matters are settled here, Stephan and I will be leaving. You're welcome to passage aboard the *Rebel*. Of course, if you want to remain behind, that's your business."

He glanced over at Stephan and Ramir who sat studying battle plans Ramir had drawn in the sand with a crooked stick. Deciding not to disturb them, he rose and left the tent. Soon after, Stephan followed him out, his discussions with Ramir over for this night. Everything had been planned down to the last detail. Now it was time to get some rest.

Ramir dropped to the ground beside her and took her hand. "This is the first opportunity we have had to be alone," he said softly. "You know, I have been so sad since you left. Seeing you again today was like being born again. You must never leave me again, Juliette, *never*."

"I did not leave by choice, Ramir," she gently reminded him.

"Ah yes, that I know, but it did little to ease my anxiety. When I returned only to find you gone, I went into a rage. As you know, I am not an irrational man, yet I came close to losing my mind. Later I walked around as if dead. No, I'll not let you out of my sight again. I am fearful that I must take you back to Tirana

with us, but what else can I do? I cannot leave you here, and I cannot spare any men to escort you back."

"But, Ramir, they know you are coming. Ishak Bey told Kemal to expect you. They will be waiting."

"Now, now," he said soothingly, patting her hand. "Do not worry your pretty little head over that. As I told you, I have long suspected Ishak Bey. The information I gave him, which he has passed on to Kemal, is false. They will be expecting us in two weeks time, but as you can see, we are early. Did I not always tell you about the element of surprise? And with the information Captain Youngblood has obtained for us, I would say our chances are getting better all the time." He smiled at her tenderly and kissed her gently on the lips.

Then, settling himself back, he pulled her into his embrace and held her. "When this is over," he whispered, "we will return to collect the others and then march proudly into Istanbul to take our rightful place on the throne. The Empire is waiting, the people are waiting. Their hour is close at hand. For me, it is merely enough to know that you will be waiting for me."

He felt her go rigid in his arms, and his black eyes searched her face intently. "Tomorrow at dawn we attack Tirana. Are you going to send me into battle not knowing whether or not you will await my return?"

Juliette closed her eyes in anguish. "Ramir, please, say no more," she pleaded.

"But I must. I must say it all. Think of what life can be for us, Juliette. An empire lies at our feet. I want to share it with you . . . only you."

Green eyes widened in astonishment. In answer, he exclaimed, "Can you believe I would rule all of this without *you*? Do you think I would even want to? What is wrong? Why do you look at me that way? Do you not wish to sit beside me in the Royal Palace as my wife?"

Her silence shocked him into sudden realization. "Allah give me strength," he breathed. "I did not

realize you may have felt otherwise." He rose and began to pace the tent, one hand tugging at his short black beard. Abruptly, he stopped pacing, returned to her and drew her to her feet. "What is it?" he asked, following after her. "Why do you hesitate? Is it your husband in England, is that it? You must not fret, my love, in this part of the world where a man can take many wives, it would go unnoticed."

Juliette struggled for something to say. "It's . . . it's not that. I . . ."

"What then? The desert? You told me you loved the desert!"

"It's not that!" Juliette cried out. "I do love the desert, and I don't give a damn about my husband, it's . . ."

Unable to bear the tortured look on his face, she bowed her head and spoke to the ground in a voice that was barely audible. "Do you remember the man I spoke of . . . the one who . . . who . . ." She could barely choke out the words.

"I remember," he answered, sparing her the ordeal of repeating the story. He shrugged as if to minimize the matter. "It is true, I suppose, that a woman never forgets her first lover, but what does that man have to do with—"

Ramir stopped then as a startling discovery began to take shape in his mind. Coming up close to her, he placed his hand on her arm, looked into her eyes.

"It is the blue-eyed captain, isn't it?"

Juliette covered her face.

Ramir turned away to hide the pain. "I think I knew it when I saw him look at you this afternoon . . . and the way you looked back at him."

For a long, agonizing minute neither spoke a word. Juliette knew how much the discovery hurt him, but she could think of nothing to say. All she could do was stand by helplessly, tears in her eyes and self-loathing in her heart.

Ramir said at last, "I will go for a walk by myself now. There is still much to plan for tomorrow's attack."

Under the circumstances, I think it inappropriate for us to spend the night together."

He stood there for a moment as if struggling desperately for the strength to walk from the tent. Coming up close to him, Juliette placed a hand gently on his sleeve.

"Ramir," she whispered, "I do love you."

"I know you do. It is just not as I would have wished."

Even now, with the pain visible in his eyes, he had the courage to smile tenderly and place a warm kiss on her lips. And then he left the tent, leaving Juliette alone with the silence and her tears.

Chapter 30

It was called the Night of Power.

It was the twenty-seventh night of the ninth month of Ramadan. Of the seven holy nights of the year, it was the most mysterious.

It was the night when all nature acknowledged the greatness of Allah. Throughout the Empire, from the great mosques of Istanbul to the humblest peasant village, thousands of Muslims knelt in prayer, swaying, chanting, moving devoutly as one being. It was the night when the destinies of all the true believers were decided.

It was the night they attacked Tirana.

The gates of Babiali had been left open in observance of this most holy night, so that any passing traveler could join those praying within. There, by the light of flares, enraptured by the rise and fall of the chanting voices, sat soldiers side by side with holy men, slaves, and beggars—even Pasha himself—all equal in the eyes of Allah, all fervent in their supplication to Him. In those pale moments before dawn, when the light seems to float to earth along surrealistic paths, the inhabitants of the Mediterranean fortress were surprised by the rebel armies of El Shahn.

In seconds, the chanting voices became confused cries, the prayers heated shouts of battle, and the serenity of the worshippers was shattered by the thunderous pounding of hooves as the rebels poured through the massive iron gates and descended upon the unsuspecting populace of the city. In a matter of

moments, terror reigned. People ran in all directions at once, shouting, screaming their fright, their anger. But the armies of the Pasha were well trained. No sooner had the initial attack scattered the worshippers, when the call to arms was given and hundreds of Janissaries seized their weapons and sprang into action. They were mounted and in formation with devastating speed. Starlight raised deadly glints off the razor-sharp blades of scimitars and swords as the two opposing armies met face to face in battle. The sounds of combat rose into the night from the walled city along with the shrieks of the women as they ran for cover behind locked doors and shuttered windows, the terrified wailing of children, and the shrieks and moans of dying men.

From her place at the foot of the fortress, Juliette stared up in horror at the towering walls of Babiali. From within, she could hear the clash of metal against metal as sword struck sword. She cringed at the awful caterwaul as metal pierced human flesh and hot lead found its target. The sounds of the dying filled her with unholy dread. Not even the battle that had nearly sent the *Rebel* to the bottom of the sea, what now seemed an eternity ago, had set her heart beating so frantically or filled her with sickening fear as this one. Back then, she'd been in the midst of it all, as likely to be slaughtered as any of the others. Now she was as good as a million miles away from the battle and the men who were fighting it, and it was harder to bear. Juliette was frantic. How could she remain hidden from danger when the others were fighting and dying? At any moment it could be Ramir's scream of pain she heard, Stephan's wail of agony. She bit her lip so hard she drew blood at a new, terrifying thought. My God, neither of them might return alive! Shutting her eyes tightly she shuddered at the horrifying possibility. Christian Youngblood could at this very moment be lying wounded . . . or worse. She began to weep, partly in despair, mostly in fear, that she might never see that recklessly handsome face again, nor feel his touch.

Heedless of all else except the battle that raged red against the sky, she stumbled over to her horse and pulled herself into the saddle. Forgotten was the promise she had made them all to remain in hiding until one of them came for her. Vanished was all thought of her own safety, as she dug her heels into the horse's sides and spurred him up the long winding path to Babiali . . . to the thick of the battle . . . to Christian Youngblood's side.

Red flames licked the sky. As she galloped closer she could see the stone walls glowing from the fires that raged through the *serai* compound. At the gate to the main courtyard, she was suddenly thrown from her horse when the terrified animal reared at the scent of fire, refusing to go any further. Thrown to the ground, Juliette barely had time to scramble to her feet when a blood-curdling cry from somewhere close by sent her running for her life, right through the gate and into a courtyard that bore no resemblance to the Eden it had once been. Bodies sprawled everywhere, and a wave of nausea flooded her mouth. She vomited onto the blood-spattered marble tiles. Coughing, heaving, gasping for breath, Juliette managed to stumble along, weaving in and out of the way of clashing swords, veering wide at the deadly swish of a scimitar. She staggered about blindly, unable to see through the smoke. Fear clutched at her from every turn, and sorrow seized her heart each time she recognized a man lying dead at her feet. She staggered along, and suddenly a shrill, high-pitched laugh she knew only too well reached her from somewhere in a curtain of smoke ahead.

With a cry, shutting her eyes tightly she ran through the suffocating smoke and found herself in the *hammam*. On the marble steps of the bath, the steps she had once stretched on so languorously, two men were engaged in a battle to the death. Each held a bloodied rapier in his hand. They parried and thrust, their graceful movements distorted by the hatred in their faces.

Christian Youngblood's blue eyes blazed in his smoke-blackened face as he lunged with devastating speed at his opponent. His free hand held high, he advanced upon his enemy, displaying the superior swordsmanship that had earned him his awesome reputation. The same skill that had taken the life of Michel Delacroix, was about to take another.

Ghiza Kemal's eyes were wild with desperation as his enemy bore down upon him, backing him into a corner. But like any wild, irrational creature put into an inescapable position, he was at his deadliest. For several tense moments the combatants were locked in a battle of equal skill, matched in strength and determination. With each thrust, Kemal taunted his opponent, provoking Christian Youngblood to irrational fury, hoping to throw him off guard.

"Yes!" shouted Kemal, "Yes, I had her! Shall I tell you what I did with her? How I turned her over and spread her legs and—"

A violent lunge from Christian's sword. Kemal swerved to the side. "Oh ho! You do not like to hear it, do you!"

Christian's roar in reply resounded through the *hammam*. "One more word and I'll cut your heart out, Kemal!"

The Pasha laughed as he continued to deflect Christian's sword. "Your fine Duchess is nothing more than a harlot! She was always eager to spread her legs for me!"

The sound that tore from Christian's throat then was more animal than human. In one swift, skillful move that was only a blur to the eye, the sword was flicked out of Kemal's hand and out of reach.

"Tell me now, Kemal," Christian said, taunting him with the tip of his rapier. "Tell me all about it! Tell me so I'll have a good excuse to cut your throat. Go on, tell me Goddamnit! Let me hear it!"

Kemal glanced about wildly for his lost weapon. Slowly he was being backed against the wall, the point of Christian Youngblood's rapier caressing his chest.

Desperate, he struck out violently, setting Christian Youngblood's reflexes into motion. In less than a heartbeat, Kemal screamed at the awful pain of the sword as it pierced his chest, sending him stumbling backward.

At the sight of the Pasha falling, the front of his tunic filling with blood, Juliette screamed. The shrill sound penetrated Christian's hate-filled mind, spinning his head in her direction. With a contemptuous glance down at Kemal, he ran to her, the bloodied weapon still clutched in his fist.

Breathing heavily, he gasped, "What are you doing here?" He gripped her roughly by the arm and shook her, as if trying to shake some sense into her.

Juliette's hair whipped wildly about her head and the tears gushed from her eyes. She could not even hear her own frightened voice above the tumult of the battle.

"I couldn't stay there!" she cried. "I just couldn't! I had to find you! Oh, Christian, I just had to find you!"

She was unaware that he had loosened his hold on her and was watching her, shaken. Now he knew of her feeling for him and it jolted him.

Juliette sobbed against his chest, spilling her salty tears down the front of his bloodied shirt. "I couldn't bear being down there, knowing that you . . . you were up here and I . . . I might never see you again. I love you Christian, and I—"

"Oh God, Juliette!" He could barely suppress the wave of fierce excitement that raced through him. Pulling her close, he smothered her mouth with a kiss that carried with it the fire of the battle still raging in his veins and his desperate longing for her.

Pulling his lips from hers finally, struggling for control, he shook her again. "You impossible woman! Don't you know you could get killed here?" But his harsh tone could not disguise his joy. "Come on, let's get out of here!"

As they turned to flee, Juliette glanced back one last time over her shoulder. Her blood froze. Ghiza Kemal had struggled to his feet, one hand clutching at the raw

red wound in his chest, the other grasping the hilt of the dagger he always wore concealed in his belt, its tip aimed precisely at the center of Christian Youngblood's back.

Juliette opened her mouth to scream, but before she could, Christian was in motion. In a blinding movement he whirled around and with one sweep of his rapier sliced the Pasha's hand right from his body. Oblivious to pain by now, unaware of his missing hand, Kemal advanced, a crazed look in his eyes.

It happened in less than a second. A fatal blow fell on the Pasha's neck, snapping it with a spine-tingling sound. The Pasha sank to the ground, dead at last.

Juliette thought she would faint and felt her legs giving way, but before she could hit the ground, Christian swept her up into his arms and carried her away.

By some miracle, Christian managed to bring them unharmed across the ruined once-beautiful courtyard, intending to get Juliette safely out of danger and return to the battle. But when they reached the gate, he saw that the battle had progressed beyond the palace compound and now raged outside the walls of the beleaguered city. A shout rose over the sounds of battle. To his right, Christian caught sight of Ramir Tabori wielding his scimitar and shouting encouragement to his men. His swarthy face, now even darker with smoke, broke into a smile when he saw them and he moved aside to allow Christian to pass.

Juliette opened her eyes in time to see Ramir's face as his men rushed by. She began to kick and scream in Christian's arms.

"Please! Please! Let me go! I must go to him! I must see him . . . just one more time!"

She just had to see him . . . tell him . . . beg him to understand why she could not stay with him. She had to make him understand and it had to be now, for something told her that she would never see Ramir Tabori after this night. "Let go of me!" she cried, tearing at Christian violently.

But Christian only tightened his hold, mercilessly so, squeezing the breath right out of her. "It's too late for that now!" he shouted. "Let him fight his battle!"

Burying her face against his chest, Juliette wept at her own helplessness, her mind reeling with terror each time a shot came dangerously close. But Christian kept going, showing no signs of exhaustion. By the time he'd carried her back down the hill, he was dragging for air, but his eyes still blazed with the fever of battle.

"Now look, if I have to, I'll tie you down to keep you here!" he warned her. "Now what is it going to be? Will you stay put?"

Emerald fires raged in her eyes. "I hate you for this!"

"Up there you told me you loved me!" he reminded her.

Juliette's mouth dropped open. "I never said any such thing! Oh! You're the most impossible man I have ever known! How could you even think I could love a brute like you?" She was almost hysterical, and Christian knew he could never trust her to remain behind. Seizing her, he spun her around. In less time than it took for Juliette to open her mouth to protest, he had her wrists firmly bound behind her back.

"Sorry, my love," he said mockingly as he dragged her unceremoniously along to a nearby shrub to which he securely fastened her. He knelt on one knee then and raised her tear-streaked face up to his. "Whatever happens up there, our part in it is over. If we don't get out now, there may not be time for us later."

"What are you talking about?" she gasped between sobs. "Ramir will win this battle! He *must* win!"

Christian stared hard at her. "If he does not, we'll never leave this place alive. We cannot wait to find out who wins." He rose, pulling the rapier from his belt. "I've got to go back for Stephan . . . I'm not leaving here without him. I'll be back for you, I promise."

When there were no more tears to shed, Juliette sat slumped against the shrub, oblivious to the thorns that pierced her tender flesh and the rope that bit cruelly

into her wrists. All hope and all fear had vanished, leaving her with an overwhelming feeling of despair.

And still it was not over. Peering into the darkness with dulled eyes, she saw shadowy human figures racing toward her. She opened her mouth to scream, but a hand reached out quickly and clamped over her mouth. A harsh voice whispered into her ear, in a familiar tone that sent waves of relief washing over her, "Keep it down, there're Janissaries all over the place. We were lucky to make it out alive."

She blinked hard at him. "We?" Gazing over his shoulder, she gasped sharply, recognizing Ramir Tabori hurrying toward them. Slumped against his shoulder and supported by his strong arm was Stephan d'Ajasson, the front of his shirt soaked with blood.

With a flick of his dagger, Christian cut the ropes and she sprang to her feet. "My God, what happened?" she cried, racing to Stephan.

"He took a bullet," answered Christian as he helped to lower the big Frenchman to the ground.

"Is he alright?" She wasn't sure she really wanted to hear the answer to that.

Ramir Tabori knelt on the ground. With a powerful jerk he tore the front of Stephan's shirt open to inspect the wound that was still oozing blood. "The shot did not pass through," he muttered, frowning. "Two inches lower and it would have pierced his heart. It must come out."

"Later," cried Christian.

"But he has already lost much blood," Ramir protested. "The bullet must come out and the wound must be cauterized, or your friend may well bleed to death."

Christian turned on him then, savagely. "I said *later*, Godamnit!"

Juliette was bewildered by the violence of his reply. "Christian, you heard what Ramir said! Stephan will die if that wound is not—"

Now he turned his angry attention on her. "You, too? It's a good thing you're remaining behind, seeing

as how you two seem to agree on everything. But he's my friend, damn it, and I'll be the one who decides what to do with him!"

Ramir was puzzled by the remark and searched Juliette's face for an explanation. "Remaining behind? But that is not what you told me, have you changed your mind then?" He could not keep the excitement out of his voice.

Juliette was confused—and angry. "No, I . . . I haven't changed my mind," she said.

Christian looked up from his ministrations to Stephan. "Are you saying that you're coming with us? You're not staying?"

She could not tell if it was anger or joy she heard in his voice. Whichever it was, it didn't matter.

"Yes! I'm going with you and Stephan!" she said, daring him with her eyes to try and stop her.

Christian smiled broadly then, the smile crinkling the corners of his eyes, reminding Juliette once again of how brutally handsome he was. "Come on then, let's go," he said.

Between them they managed to get Stephan into the saddle, a formidable task considering the size of him. Christian swung up behind him, his arms on either side of the swaying Frenchman. "You'll have to ride alone," he told her. "Can you manage it?"

"What do you think?" she told him.

Christian laughed. "I think I'm a fool for asking."

When they were ready to leave, Juliette turned back to Ramir who stood watching them, a tortured look on his face. She struggled for something to say, but her eyes said it all. Ramir smiled tenderly and handed her the reins of her horse.

"You must ride from this place as fast as you can. Above all, my love, you must not look back."

In a voice husky with emotion, she whispered, "I will pray for you."

"Do not fear for me, Juliette. My time is at hand. Tirana is already a fallen city. With Kemal dead, the soldiers are without a leader. They will fight on blindly

for a while and then they will realize their defeat. The people remain barricaded behind their doors waiting to greet the victor. At this point they know not who that will be, but I, El Shahin, know."

Then, turning to Christian Youngblood, he extended his hand in a gesture that spoke of more than friendship. "We never did get to test our strength at sea, Captain, but your help here has been invaluable to me and my people. You will please extend my heartfelt thanks to the Marquis when he is well. Above all, thank *you* Captain . . . my good friend. You may return to your own struggle and assure your government that I offer it my full support."

The time had come. The goodbyes were said and anything else would have been too painful.

At the snap of the reins, Christian's horse reared, pawing the air with its hooves. Starlight glinted off the rapier Christian Youngblood held high above his head in salute to a victorious leader.

"El Shahin!" Christian cried, then nudged his heels into his animal's flanks.

Seconds later, they were racing away. Ramir Tabori's last words still burning in her mind, Juliette did not look back.

Chapter 31

The *Rebel* took to the open sea like a caged bird released to flight. Just as a captured bird never loses its ability to fly, the *Rebel* had lost none of her power to challenge the sea.

The going was difficult, for the crew had been strictly limited to those few men who could be trusted—not only to keep the mission to Anatolia a secret, but to keep from going mad in the long days of boredom aboard a docked ship. The days had stretched into weeks, and though none of the crew had seriously considered mutiny, it was with more than usual frenzy that they greeted their Captain, and immediately put to sea.

No one, with perhaps the exception of Juliette, was sorry to leave Anatolia behind. That first night at sea she had gazed back at the receding shoreline to see a red glow against the sky as the once mighty city of Tirana continued to burn long into the night. Soon even that disappeared as the *Rebel* sailed farther away from the past.

That night, for Juliette, was a strange combination of regret at leaving something precious behind, fear at what lay ahead, and untold joy at the startling change in Christian Youngblood.

He was calmer, more relaxed, quicker to laugh, despite the urgency of their flight and the dangerous condition Stephan was in. After carrying the Frenchman to his own cabin and remaining there with him for

several hours, Christian joined Juliette on deck just as the sun was setting. His face had been scrubbed of its battle grime and he had changed into fresh clothes.

"I had some trouble getting that pistol ball out, but he'll live."

Juliette looked at him in amazement. "You took it out?"

"Yes love, I took it out. Do you doubt my skills as a physician?" He grinned in that disarming way of his, the bright blue eyes dancing mischievously. "I used to have a physician aboard, but his love of drink far exceeded his interest in his patients, so I kicked him off at one of the islands—St. Martin, I think it was." He shrugged. "I tend to the crew myself now, as best I can. Stephan has a slight fever now, but unless there's a change, he should be fine. It would take more than that to stop that man."

Juliette smiled at that. Yes, that stubborn Frenchman would never leave this earth without a fight, that was certain. She was about to say as much to Christian but stopped, sensing something in his manner.

Christian was not looking at her but out into the blackness, his eyes studying the distance, ears straining for something she could not hear. As his eyes looked out to sea, Juliette's eyes looked at him . . . traveling the line of his flawless profile, across the straight nose and full lips, over the mass of thick, black curls that hung carelessly over his collar. Even his hands were perfect, long, tapered fingers resting on the ship's bulwark. They were hands that knew every inch of her body, hands that knew how to tease and caress her into boundless passion.

Those hands were suddenly at her back and pulling her firmly against his chest. Those sensual lips were at her ear whispering breathless love words as he swept her into the air and carried her below deck.

He made love to her that night as he had never done before, mixing her desire with his until she thought she would go mad. She yielded to every caress, but not as a

passive creature allowing him control over her body. Kissing, biting, licking between soft, breathless moans and heated demands she urged him on.

She had never in her life known it could be like this, not once, but many times into the morning, as each of them could not get enough of the other. They fell asleep exhausted, long after sunrise. She awoke to the intoxicating feel of his fingertips gently pressing between her thighs. Still drowsy with sleep, she obliged him by parting her slender legs and pulling him down so that she could feel him growing hard inside of her once again.

She was asleep when Christian got up and dressed. He pulled the covers over her, placed a warm kiss on her lips, and left her to sleep the rest of the day. That evening, after she'd bathed in water scented with fragrant oils, Juliette was confronted with the problem of what to wear. She certainly could not go back to the blackened slave garments she had shed. Resigned to a pair of Christian's breeches and one of his oversized shirts, she was surprised when he entered the cabin with something draped over his arm that looked vaguely familiar. He smiled sheepishly as he handed the dress to her. "I had this cleaned up and sewn."

Juliette stared in speechless wonder at the gown, the very gown of pale ivory silk she had worn—so very long ago it seemed—to a Royal ball. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing the long forgotten past. Haltingly, she took the dress. Once she felt its silky softness, she forgot Christian was even in the room. It would feel so good to wear a gown again, and not the primitive revealing costume of a Pasha's concubine.

"You might want this too," Christian said, placing in her palm a short-bristled tortoise-shell hairbrush. "I picked it up on one of the islands. I'll be back for dinner to see that you've put those to good use." With a wink that made her blush, he was gone.

With her long dark hair brushed to a lustrous gloss and the silk gown hugging her seductively, she was magnificent. In no time, however, the gown was tossed

aside and the hair she had so carefully brushed was in wild tangles from their heated lovemaking. But neither of them seemed to mind.

He couldn't stay long, though her soft pleadings and wicked promises sorely tempted him. But at the back of his mind was an anxiety demanding his attention.

Stephan's condition was worse. While they lay in each other's arms, behaving as if nothing else in the world mattered, Stephan d'Ajasson lay delirious in Christian's cabin, unable to distinguish reality from the relentless nightmares that plagued him.

For days the Frenchman's fever raged as he lay twisting and turning and muttering unintelligibly in Christian's bed. Christian Youngblood hardly moved from his side except to make brief appearances on deck to issue orders and quick visits to his bewitching little temptress.

The evening of the sixth day at sea found Christian hunched over his desk in his cabin, head in his hands, eyes closed, giving in to the exhaustion he had been fighting now for days. But as ever, a part of his mind remained alert. Just as he was slipping into a dark dream, a sound from the bed brought him fully awake. With a sigh, Christian rose and went to kneel by the bed.

Stephan was moaning softly and mumbling, the words indecipherable. Frowning, Christian was beginning to rise when one word—soft and low—held him there. Bending closer, he placed his ear to Stephan's lips and listened, unprepared for what he heard.

The Frenchman spoke in his native tongue, the words coming in soft gasps, but Christian understood every word.

"Juliette . . . Juliette . . . *ma chérie* . . . your lips . . . again . . . let me kiss them again . . . I . . . I . . . love you. . . ."

Blue eyes blazed with electric intensity at the man on the bed.

What was this? Bending closer again, his ear to

Stephan's lips, he listened, jaw muscles twitching involuntarily, thoughts exploding.

Damn! So that scheming Frenchman had lied when he had said that nothing happened at Amherst! I was a fool to believe him! A bloody fool!

Rising stiffly, he stood beside the bed, his head suddenly racing with anger. He had been deceived! Tricked! Taken for a fool by that self-serving Frenchman! Stunned by the discovery, he began to pace the cabin, stopping now and then to look at the man on the bed. So that's what it had come to, he thought bitterly. Stephan wanted the woman! Well, curse him, he'd not have her! He'd *never* have her! She was his, damn it! He had seen to that the very first night he had taken her . . . the night he had put his stamp on her. And curse that blasted Frenchman for daring to forget!

In the midst of his outrage, Christian became aware of an undeniable truth that sickened him. He knew now that he would kill any man who tried to take her from him. His glance fell upon Stephan d'Ajasson. Even him . . . the man he had considered his best friend. With that, he stalked from the cabin.

On deck he strode angrily to the helm calling for his First Mate. The man came running, knowing too well consequences of his captain's fiery temper.

"Ay, Cap'n!" he saluted him.

Not looking at him, Christian snarled, "Tend to the Marquis! See that he gets what he needs!"

The order was issued hard and clear, but the man looked bewildered. "But Cap'n, you said only you was to tend him."

Christian's bellow shrank the man. "I know what I said, Goddammit! And I know what I'm telling you now! The Marquis is your responsibility, Willis! I've got a ship to run! I can't be playing nursemaid. You just see to it that he doesn't die, or you'll be dangling from the tip of my sword! Do you understand?"

Willis backed off nodding feebly. He had seen his captain in foul moods many times, but never quite like

this, never seemingly without reason. Something was very wrong.

That night at dinner, Juliette wondered what had sent Christian into his sullen mood. He had barely spoken a word all night, glared at her when she attempted to draw him into conversation. Now, she tried again.

"I thought I might take a walk on deck after dinner."

The only response that brought was a brief icy look, then he continued eating in stony silence.

"I take it you have no objections then?"

He replied curtly, "None."

Juliette drew in an uneasy breath. She had seen him angry many times, but never quite like this. She knew he was holding tightly to his self-control, and the growing tension in the cabin confirmed that he was beginning to lose his grip on it. Juliette steeled herself for the inevitable explosion as she tried to divert his attention with small talk.

Damn him, why was he acting like this now? These past few days he had been so different, displaying for the first time all the tenderness he was capable of. Now, here he was, withdrawn, sullen, a sulky boy ruled by irrational anger.

Pushing her plate away, she sat back. "How is Stephan tonight?"

How could she have known it was the wrong thing to say? Christian grew rigid and slid his plate away deliberately, as though he had suddenly lost his appetite. Touching a linen napkin to his lips, he answered simply, "He's alive."

She gave him a sharp look. "You sound disappointed."

Sitting back in his chair, Christian stretched his legs out in front of him. "You're mistaken," he replied, his face and voice expressionless.

His mood was beginning to irk her. She was rapidly losing patience with him. Rising, Juliette announced, "Well, then, perhaps I'll pay him a visit."

His voice cut through her like a knife. "Perhaps you'll consider yourself lucky that I allow you to walk on deck. You are *not* to see him."

Juliette felt her knees go weak. So, were they back to that? Was she once again to be a prisoner aboard this ship? Old memories came flooding back, reminding her of the kind of man he really was. He had the ability to kill with a smile, wound with his eyes, transform her into a helpless mass of quivering flesh with his touch. But she would not be his slave! She would not let him bully her about any longer!

With a defiant toss of her head, she began to stalk about the cabin. A new thought struck, and she spun around to face him. Hands on her hips she challenged him. "I suppose you're going to insist on accompanying me to Amherst?"

"You're damned right I am."

"I am perfectly capable of confronting my own husband without your help!"

Christian got up from the table. "Don't flatter yourself, my love," he said, in the old mocking tone. He went to the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of Jamaican rum. "I've got my own scores to settle, but I'll wager you'll thank me for coming when you find out what you're confronting."

"I know perfectly well what I'm confronting!"

"You know nothing about him!" His voice rose angrily as he savagely pulled the cork from the bottle. Tilting the bottle to his lips, he drank in long swallows, then carried the bottle back to the table. Setting it down, he gave her a humorless smile and asked, "What could you know about him?"

Juliette came forward to answer him. "I know a great deal about him. I know he is an unfeeling man, a man void of emotion."

"Ah, human nature, my love," Christian said, "that combination of whatever it is that makes us whatever we are." He gave a short laugh. "Nobody ever liked Trevor but it was because he expected them not to. In my brother's world everyone lives up to his expecta-

tions because his expectations are not very high. He just naturally assumes people feel about him as he feels about himself."

Green eyes shining brightly, chin up in determined defiance, Juliette said, "I'll not change my mind about going back to Amherst. I know you think I should go straight to Paris, but I'm not going to. Besides there are ways for a woman to know a man that a man could never understand."

He looked amused at that. "I'll wager Trevor never even comes to your bed, so what ways could you mean?"

The color drained from Juliette's face, and Christian knew he had spoken the truth, or close to it.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Don't you see? Doesn't it strike you as odd that a healthy young man would not be in his wife's bed, especially if his wife is a beautiful, irresistible woman? Haven't you ever wondered about that?"

Juliette could not avoid his penetrating stare. "I thought in some way I was not . . . not to his liking."

Christian gasped at her in amazement. "Christ! You're one of the most desirable women in the world, damn you. What man could resist you? What are you hiding with such a lame excuse?"

She bit her lip. She would die if she had to tell him about her relations with Trevor, yet she knew he would hound her relentlessly until she did. When she spoke again, her voice was barely more than a whisper.

"He . . . he does come to my bed," she confessed, "but only when he is drunk . . . almost senseless."

"Drunk you say? It must be awful to have his stinking breath so close to you. Tell me, how could you bear the stench of brandy seeping from every pore as he caresses you?"

She winced, partly because of his cruel jibe, partly from recollection, as her mind conjured up the unpleasant image of her husband when he came to her late at night. She could almost feel his cold hands fumbling awkwardly. She could recall the embarrassment of his

lovmaking. She could see the look of shame in his brown eyes, feel the sickness stirring in her stomach . . . but she could not recall ever being repelled by his odor! She could not because there was no stench of brandy. Why hadn't she noticed it before? Why had she never realized that he never seemed to show any ill effects the next morning?

Reading the shock and bewilderment in her eyes, Christian rose and went to her, grasping her by the arm, forcing her to look at him. "Don't tell me you never knew!"

Juliette pulled away. "I don't know what you're talking about! You have no right to interfere in my private affairs!"

"The hell I don't! I have more right than you think, particularly since you know so little about the man you're married to!"

She was furious now. "You're playing games with me! You're trying to frighten me, and I won't have it!"

Christian's grip tightened painfully on her arm. "Have you ever seen Trevor have more than two drinks? Do you really believe he comes to you filled with drunken lust? Do you really think that ship was bound for Izmir to load *olives*? Can you be so naive?"

"Stop it!" Juliette cried, "I don't want to hear any more!"

"Well, you will listen! It's time you found out just what your husband is!" His face had gone so white with rage and his blazing blue eyes were the only trace of color on it. "It's not liquor," he said, "it never was."

He released her then. Returning to the table, he slumped down into the chair, staring into space as if he were a million miles away.

"My brother is hopelessly addicted to opium," he said at last. "He has been ever since he was a boy. Those 'drunken sprees' are the sorry result of a desperate craving that will one day consume him."

He began to speak more quickly, as if eager to have it over and done. "It's for the pain that ravages his brain as though his mind were on fire. I can still see it . . . the

way his fingers would twist into white knots . . . the look on his face as he'd drink it down. Back then it was Uncle Freddy who put it into his milk. Today he pours it in himself, into his tonic. But the results are the same . . . the same faraway look in his eyes, the same rigid posture and swaying step. He becomes unreachable at those times, as though he's placed himself a million miles out of the world's reach."

He was silent for a moment while Juliette waited, barely breathing. At last, he said, "He is beyond saving. How can you save a man who has been dead for years?" he asked, raising his eyes to hers. "He is a dangerous man. Much too dangerous for you to deal with alone. Besides," his voice grew harsh again, "I told you I've got some scores of my own to settle with Trevor and Uncle Freddy. So, whether you like it or not, we're *both* going to Amherst."

Chapter 32

The English countryside was settling into its winter sleep when they arrived back at Amherst Hall. The big mansion lay cold and lifeless. There were no warm, friendly fires raging in the hearths, no flowers in the hallway vases to perfume the air. The countless leaded windows were locked, the heavy brocade draperies drawn as though the sun were an enemy whose entrance must be fiercely guarded against.

Of the servants, only old Martha Ruddy remained to see to the needs of the empty house which, these days, were few. She hugged Christian like a long-lost son, then led them into the study that had once resounded with England's most influential voices, but now was dark and silent, the furniture draped with white covers that had already attracted a thick layer of dust. The old housekeeper served hot tea from a tarnished silver pot and spoke of the place with sadness as if she were watching an old and dear friend die.

"This old house just isn't what it used to be," she told them as she sipped her tea. "When we received word that the *Ariel* had been attacked, His Grace let all the help go and ordered the place closed. He spends all of his time in London now. And Lord Alfred," she spoke his name with obvious distaste, "well, he never came around much anyway."

Juliette and Christian exchanged a look. "Tell me, Martha," said Christian, "is old Seth still here?"

Martha nodded. "Ay, but it's only me and him now."

"All right then, I want you to send Seth to London with a message for Trevor. There's no need to tell Trevor that we're here, just say that something urgent has come up and his presence is required at Amherst Hall immediately."

She looked at him fearfully. Christian smiled and took her hand. "Don't worry, love, I'll take care of him when he arrives. You needn't get involved."

Martha heaved a deep sigh. "It's just that he can be so . . . so unreasonable at times. Since he heard about the *Ariel*, it's been worse. I've never known that man to grieve over anything. If I didn't see it myself, I would never have believed it. Could it be, after all these years, I've misjudged him?"

Christian shook his head. "Oh, he's grieving all right," he said sarcastically, "but not over the loss of his wife. But, never mind Martha, that doesn't concern you. Just get that message off to London right away."

Martha smiled at him, the look conveying all the love she felt for this man who was the son she had never had. If he asked it, it was as good as done.

That evening Seth left for London. Now they could only wait.

Early one morning, Juliette was taking tea in the study when she heard the sound of a carriage pulling into the courtyard. Her hand holding the teacup froze halfway to her lips. Panic seized her—Christian was still out riding! She waited breathless, then she heard footsteps and finally Trevor's voice. In the next moment the study door swung open.

He did not see her as he strode in. He was dressed impeccably, as always, in a ruffled white silk shirt and a blue velvet frockcoat that was tailored for his lean frame. Tight-fitting fawn-colored breeches tapered off into shiny black leather boots. He was still as handsome as she remembered him and at the moment obviously annoyed.

"I'm telling you, Martha," he was saying to the old woman who had followed him into the room, "this had

better be important!" He pulled off his gloves and slapped them down on the table. "You called me away from a very important meeting, and—"

"Hello, Trevor."

At the sound of Juliette's voice he whirled around, brown eyes opening wide and mouth dropping open in shock.

"Surprised to see me?" she asked, knowing it was a foolish question.

"Juliette—I . . ."

"Here," she said. She poured a glass of brandy and placed it in his hand. "You look as if you may need this."

He accepted the brandy and drank it down greedily. Finally, he made another effort at speech. "How can it be?" he questioned, shaking his head. "I was told—that is, they said . . ."

"Yes, well, as you can see, they were wrong," Juliette said, smiling at him.

He came toward her then, arms outstretched. For a fleet instant, Juliette expected him to take her in his arms, hold her close. Instead, he grasped her lightly by the shoulders and placed a stiff kiss on her cheek.

She drew away. "I can see you are beside yourself with joy," she commented bitterly.

"I thought you were dead," Trevor protested. "It takes time to adjust to the . . . the shock of seeing you again. Surely you can understand that!"

Juliette gave him a hard look. "That is your excuse now, what was it before?"

"Before?" He tried to appear casual, to control his nervousness. "I have never been a very demonstrative person, Juliette, you know that. It is simply not my nature to display the kind of emotion you have always demanded of me."

"I see," she said. "It is simply not your nature, how very interesting. You were born with it then."

He gave her a questioning look and answered cautiously, "I suppose we are all limited by the traits we are born with. I see no reason to apologize for mine."

Juliette sighed and turned away. "It's no use, Trevor; how about the other 'traits,' the ones you acquired along the way? I know all about the pain, Trevor, *and* the medicine," she added deliberately.

Trevor walked past her to the french windows and stared out at the grounds beyond. It seemed a long time before he spoke again. "How did you find out? Who told you?"

"I did!"

They both turned at the sound of the voice. Christian Youngblood stood lounging indolently in the doorway.

The blood rushed from Trevor's face. "So, you have returned together! How convenient! You should have informed me you were coming, brother, I would have prepared a truly elegant reception!"

"No matter," Christian said, coming forward into the room, "I'm staying only long enough to settle some matters."

Trevor sneered at him. "Yes, I should have known it was not the pleasure of my company you wanted. Very well, say what you must and leave. Juliette and I have much to discuss . . . alone."

"Whatever you have to say to Juliette, you can say now, for she'll be leaving with me."

Trevor snapped his head around to look at Juliette. "What? What is he talking about?"

Juliette did her best to steel herself against the genuine shock she saw in his face.

"I can't stay, Trevor. Did you seriously think I could after everything that has happened?"

"You don't know what you are saying," he declared. "You are tired, that's all. Why don't you go upstairs now and tomorrow we'll talk."

"There will be no tomorrow for us," responded Juliette. "It all ends here . . . now."

He drew closer to her. There was an expression in his eyes she had never seen there before. "Juliette, listen to me. If you know about . . . about my illness, then you know it has not been easy for me. But what you do not know is the extent to which I have suffered. I am

not talking about the pain—that I can live with—I am talking about you. Please, don't turn away from me . . . listen to what I have to say."

He spoke pleadingly, oblivious to Christian's presence. "How many times do you think I have looked at you and wished I could summon the physical capacity to match my desires? Yes, I have wanted you, Juliette. More than you can ever imagine. But, I am a slave to a sickness that is destroying me bit by bit, heartbeat by heartbeat. Believe me when I tell you that you have been the one treasure in my life, the only joy this withered soul has ever tasted!"

Christian leaped forward, sweeping Juliette aside. "Don't believe it!" he cried, glowering at Trevor.

But Trevor's eloquence was lost on Juliette. With a shake of her head, she dismissed the speech. "We are speaking of two different things, Trevor. Your addiction is pitiful, but it would not disgust me if it were not for your other habits."

All life drained from his face, leaving it ashen and drawn. He ran his tongue nervously over his lips. "Other habits? I . . . I do not know what you are talking about."

"Oh, Trevor, please spare me the lies. *Here* is what I am talking about!" Thrusting her hand out savagely, she opened it to reveal a small silver button. The look on his face told her he recognized its significance. "This came some time ago with a note detailing your . . . preferences . . . so that I would never forget what you are!"

His manner changed abruptly now that there was no longer any need for pretense. He turned savagely on Christian.

"And do you know what *he* is? Are you aware of the destruction he has wreaked in his oh-so-noble endeavors?"

"I am aware of it," Juliette answered, "but that destruction has been for a cause you know nothing about!"

"Ah yes, the cause—the American cause of free-

dom." Trevor gave a short, bitter laugh. "Has he ever mentioned that his heroics included the destruction of French ships? Black Star ships?" He stood back, gloating triumphantly at the look of shock in Juliette's eye.

She turned to Christian, but he stood there tight-lipped, glaring at Trevor, making no effort to deny the charge. Juliette wanted to turn and run as far away from there as possible. Her mind spun wildly, thoughts swirling in a vortex of angry confusion. It was Christian who had destroyed the Black Star ships! Christian whose cunning had sent them to their doom! She recalled thinking at the time that there was too much of a pattern in the sinkings to be accidental, but she had never thought—

Her eyes challenged Christian's. "Why?" she asked. "Why?"

But it was Trevor who replied. "It was all part of the plan, my dear, didn't you know? It seems he had some irrational objection to our marriage. He threatened to put an end to the Black Star Line if I made you my wife."

Green eyes locked furiously with blue. "Is that true?" she demanded. "Answer me, damn it! Is that true?"

Christian nodded stiffly.

"Why?" Juliette shrieked.

"Why do you think?" he snarled. "He only married you to get his hands on those ships so he could keep himself supplied with opium! And, if I know my dear brother, he was hoping to make a profit with it in the bargain!"

Christian went on, venting his rage. "All he has ever wanted is what did not belong to him! He can be so elegant, so persuasive, you forget what a snake he is underneath!"

Trevor's temples were beginning to throb. It took all his strength to fight down the onrush of pain. His silence only infuriated Christian more.

"The only way to make him understand anything is to

strike him where it hurts the most. That's why I destroyed those ships!"

The pain was almost unbearable now. Facing his brother squarely, his voice tight with the effort it cost him to remain there, Trevor said, "Now who is the liar? You did it because of that ridiculous pride of yours. You just could not believe that Juliette would choose me over you. You were angry—angry that you could not have what you wanted. You are not so very different from me after all, brother. Why can't you admit it?"

"All right," stormed Christian. "All right, damn it! I *was* angry. Angry enough to destroy those ships!"

"Because you wanted Juliette for yourself," Trevor charged, not letting up, forcing him to face the truth. "Admit it—you wanted her for yourself!"

Christian could stand no more. "Yes! Yes I wanted her for myself, and I'll kill you if you try to take her back!" His hand moved to the pistol in his belt.

Juliette shrieked and ran to him, grabbing his sleeve. "Christian! Please! Stop! He's your brother!"

But the pistol was already out and pointed at Trevor. "Brother? As far as I'm concerned, I never had a brother!"

Trevor was struggling to maintain control. His medicine . . . he needed his medicine. God, how his head hurt! But he looked scornfully at the pistol aimed at his heart. When he spoke, it seemed to him his voice came from far away. "It would be just like you to kill me without giving me a chance to defend myself."

Christian smiled cruelly at the challenge. "You want a chance to defend yourself? Very well then. Tomorrow . . . at sunrise. You know that grassy tract lined with oaks—?"

"No!" Juliette's voice, shrill with hysteria, rose above his. "Christian—please! That's enough! Let's leave this place—now!"

Both men ignored her.

"I know the place," said Trevor.

Her brain numb with horror, a clenched fist pressed to her mouth to keep from crying out, Juliette heard Christian say:

"Good. Be there, and make certain you're lucid. I want you to have all your wits about you when I kill you."

Chapter 33

Afterward, only hazy images of that day remained in her memory. The sun slowly rose from the horizon, sending streamers of dusty pink and orange across the eastern sky. The dawn light touched the bare branches of the massive oaks. Scattered about the ground were the last of their fallen leaves: yellow, gold, red.

Juliette's heart was pounding in her temples, each beat like the blow of a hammer. This was a dream . . . a nightmare. It just couldn't be happening! And since Christian and Trevor had declined to have seconds, there was no one else present whom Juliette might have begged to stop them.

In anguish, she watched the count begin, each step that took the brothers away from each other taking one of them closer to his doom. *Six . . . seven . . . eight*, she counted silently. *Nine . . . ten . . . eleven . . . twelve . . .* Dear God, stop this before something terrible happens! *Thirteen . . . fourteen . . . fifteen . . .* She had pleaded with Christian all night not to go through with it, but he was beyond reason. *Sixteen . . . seventeen . . .* Christian was a good shot, but what if—*Eighteen . . . nineteen . . .* She found herself praying. *Twenty . . .* Tears slipped silently from her eyes.

The two men turned and faced each other; the shots shattered the early morning peace. Juliette screamed and closed her eyes. She opened them again immediately.

Both men stood rigid, the pistols still smoking in their hands. Juliette's glance moved from one to the

other, not daring to hope. Could it be—? But then Trevor began to sway. Even from where she stood she could see the color drain from his face, and then the dark red stain spreading on his waistcoat. As she watched with tortured eyes, he staggered backward and fell to the ground.

The anguished shout that tore from Christian's throat pulled Juliette out of her trance and propelled her forward. When she reached Trevor, Christian was already kneeling at his side, his face white, blue eyes wild and bright.

"Trevor!" he cried. He seemed strangely tortured for a man who had achieved what he had set out to do. "Trevor!"

Trevor's eyes opened slowly and his lips moved imperceptibly. His breathing was ragged and blood flowed from the hole in his chest.

Gently, Christian raised his head and stroked the dark curling hair damp with perspiration.

"Trevor . . ." His voice broke. "Trevor . . . I didn't . . . I didn't . . ."

But the dark eyes rolled back, and Trevor's head slumped to one side, telling Christian that whatever he meant to say no longer mattered.

The sharp gasp reminded Christian of Juliette's presence. Rising unsteadily to his feet, he looked at her, a strange, tortured look on his face, his eyes filling with tears.

"I . . . I didn't do it. I didn't do it. I don't understand—"

Juliette stared down at the man at their feet who lay on the damp morning grass as though asleep, then back up at Christian.

"He's dead, dear God, you killed him!" She was torn between horror and relief. Christian was still alive, but somehow she could find no reason to rejoice.

"Killed him?" His voice was an agonized wail at her ear. "I didn't do it, I tell you. I couldn't have! I aimed high! High, I tell you! I never even meant to come close!"

His eyes searched her face frantically, seeking understanding. But what else was there to understand? The two men had faced each other in a duel and now Trevor Kenmare lay dead. The picture was all too horribly clear to Juliette. Seeing the doubt in her eyes, Christian whirled away and began to run, oblivious to her cries. He had to find it—find the proof that he hadn't killed Trevor. Where was it, Goddamnit? Where was it?

Eyes studying the ground as he ran, he searched for the sign that would tell him that he had not made a terrible mistake. Forcing down the sickness that rose in his throat, he raced to the huge oak that had stood at Trevor's back. Running his hands over its rough trunk, he found what he was looking for.

"Here it is!" he shouted to Juliette. "Here!"

Savagely he tore at the tree, ripping chunks of bark from the trunk, tearing the skin on his hands.

"Christian! Your poor hands—!"

"Never mind that," he said excitedly. "Look—what did I tell you?"

There, imbedded in the trunk of the massive oak tree was the lead bullet fired from Christian's gun. Juliette stared in bewilderment.

"But . . . but . . . *how?*?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"But if you didn't kill Trevor, who did?"

"I said, I don't know, damn it!" His bellow did nothing to ease the situation. Juliette shrank back, too confused to think rationally. Dear God, what was happening here? Trevor Kenmare lay dead but the bullet that killed him had not come from Christian Youngblood's pistol. Where *had* it come from? Who—? But she had no time to consider the puzzle further. Christian was suddenly all action.

"Come on, help me! Damn it, Juliette, you've got to help me get him back to the house, and then we've both got to get out of here!"

She obeyed his instructions blindly, moving according to a will outside her own. Together, they lifted Trevor onto the back of his horse and led him away

from that dreadful spot . . . away from the pain and misery and memory of a day that would remain with them forever.

Martha met them at the door, her ashen face telling them that she had suspected all along what they were up to. She had not known which of the brothers would return alive, and though seeing Christian had given her heart a measure of relief, she could feel no joy. She had never questioned which of the brothers was her favorite, but the sight of Trevor's body in Christian's arms brought a sting of hot tears to her tired eyes, for in her heart she had loved him too.

She led them to Trevor's room where Christian placed the body gently on the bed, then stood back looking down at it for a long minute in silence, a twitch at the corner of his mouth hinting at what was going on inside him.

Kneeling beside the bed, he gazed at the dead face of the man he had damned and hated and, like Martha, loved.

"Now you will be free of the pain," he whispered close to Trevor's ear. Bending over, he kissed the forehead that would never feel the display of tenderness.

Downstairs in the kitchen, he downed three quick shots of whiskey while Juliette sat white and trembling, her back pressed tight against her chair.

Martha approached Christian now. "You've got to leave here," she warned him. Looking back over her shoulder at Juliette, she said, "Neither of you must be here when they come."

Christian stared at her. "But I can't leave you here alone to handle this," he protested.

"Nonsense," Martha said. "If it's discovered who you are, you'll be thrown into prison. You have no choice now—you must go."

Christian began pacing the kitchen floor. Running a hand through his hair he shook his head. "But someone does know I am here. Whoever shot Trevor knows. Who was it, damn it, who?"

"I've got a feeling about that," said Martha. "There's only one person I know who could have learned that Trevor was called back to Amherst. Only one person I know who's evil enough to—" She stopped, threw a look at Christian. "He has the power to bring the authorities down on you before you could blink an eye. It would be just like him to hide behind a tree, then race back to London to spread evil rumors. That's why you've got to go today . . . now! You don't have a minute to waste. Just don't worry, I'll take care of everything."

"But how? Martha, you can't—" he persisted.

"Don't be telling me what I can't do," Martha snapped at him. "I can and I will. I haven't lived in this house these many years without learning a few things. For once in your life, Christian, keep your mouth shut and listen! There, that's better. . . . We've been having some thieving in the country, nothing big, but Squire Widecomb lost a mare in foal and the Abbot over at St. Just lost a silver chalice and a couple of goats. Now, who's to say that those rascals didn't try their hand at Amherst Hall, only to find His Grace at home? No, don't you worry none, Christian, me lad. I'll give the authorities a full description of those devils . . . those murderers. And while they're racing all over looking for them, you and Her Grace can get back to France, or wherever it is you'll be going."

"Martha, I—" Christian began.

"Never mind! Go on . . . get out of here."

They had forgotten Juliette until she reached out and caught Martha by the arm. Pulling the old woman close, she whispered, "Thank you . . . for everything. You were the only friend I had at Amherst Hall and I shall never forget you for that."

Martha fought hard to keep back the tears. "It was easy, child. You never deserved what they put you through." Then, turning to Christian, she reached out a trembling hand. "Here I am losing you again," she said, her voice breaking.

He wound his arms around her, drawing her close.

"You'll never lose me, Martha. Not as long as you keep me locked up in that tough old heart of yours." Releasing her, he gave her a wicked smile, blue eyes dancing. "Stay as beautiful as you are right now," he said, winking at her roguishly. Then he turned and led Juliette from the house.

Chapter 34

Juliette had been in the hospital for a week now, and she was still feeling the effects of the surgery. She was tired, but she was also feeling a sense of relief. The pain was gone, and she was able to move around without any discomfort. She was grateful for the doctors and nurses who had taken care of her. They had been so kind and professional. She was sure that she would be able to get back to her normal life soon.

She was sitting in her room, looking out the window. The sun was shining brightly, and the birds were singing. It was a beautiful day. She was feeling better and better. She was sure that she would be able to get back to her normal life soon. She was grateful for the doctors and nurses who had taken care of her. They had been so kind and professional. She was sure that she would be able to get back to her normal life soon.

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Chapter 34

Enjolé le Roy stood at the tall double windows, teacup poised at her lips, a worried frown on her still-youthful face. She gazed out at the small garden patio where raindrops splattered on the white tiles and the apple tree stood bare. Longingly she thought back to a time, not so distant, when the laughter of a radiantly happy young girl had filled the garden, as bright and gay as the flowers that bloomed there. Now it was winter; the flowers were gone and so was the girl of that spring.

Ever since Juliette had returned to Paris things had changed. Well no, that was not exactly right, thought Enjolé with a sigh. Things had changed the day she left, but Enjolé had never imagined what a startling change it would be.

Two years ago she had said *adieu* to a young and innocent girl on the brink of womanhood whose sensuality was tempered by the mischievous glint in her emerald eyes. Sometime in between, Juliette had stepped over the intangible line. Her playful girlish smile had been transformed into a woman's smoldering promise, her flirtatious teasing was now a blatant challenge that only a woman of such unequalled beauty would dare to make. She had become a stranger to her Godmother.

Juliette's changeable moods did little to ease the situation. One moment she was quiet and restrained, withdrawing into her private thoughts where Enjolé could not reach her. The next moment she would explode in a fiery rage, impatient with the least little

thing, finding fault with everything and satisfaction with nothing. And she was more defiant than ever. She even insisted on going out alone to ride along the Champs Elysees, causing tongues to wag furiously at her scandalous behavior.

For Enjolé, her niece's return had become an exasperating ordeal. Each day brought a new test of wills, and Enjolé's long-suffering patience was rapidly giving out.

A sound from the doorway brought Enjolé out of her reverie. She turned from the window to see Juliette enter the room, a long velvet cloak over her shoulders and tied at her neck. This, for Enjolé, was the last straw.

"You are going out riding rather early, aren't you?" She did not bother to hide her displeasure.

Juliette did not give her Godmother her usual saucy reply. Untying her cloak, she tossed it carelessly over the back of a chair. "I have already been out," she said.

It was then the Enjolé noticed that her cloak was wet, her cheeks reddened by the chill wind.

"Juliette! This I do not believe! You were out riding again by yourself? In this rain? Honestly, you can be impossible at times!"

Juliette rolled her eyes toward heaven and gave an exaggerated sigh. "Oh, Tante, sometimes I wonder whether it is my safety or my reputation that you worry about most."

"Well, you certainly seem bent on jeopardizing both," Enjolé told her bluntly.

Raising an eyebrow, Juliette said, "Oh, are they talking about me at Madame Geoffrin's? I should be honored, I suppose, to have my name mentioned in the same breath as royalty. Do you think I care what people think of me? Let them talk! None of them knows the truth anyway. Even if they did, they would believe only what they want and distort the rest!"

Enjolé came forward then, shaking her head disapprovingly. "Juliette, you have changed so."

"Of course I have changed! Or shall we pretend that

nothing has happened since we last saw each other? Would you like me to elaborate on the details of the past two years, Tante? Would you like me to confirm just how much of what the gossips say is true? Are you really so sure you want to hear it?"

Looking into her goddaughter's green eyes, Enjolé read the unmistakable challenge written in them. "There is no need for that," she replied. "I already know."

Juliette turned away. "No, you don't know . . . you can't know."

Misunderstanding her meaning, Enjolé said, "If it were up to you, I would not. But, fortunately, I did not have to wait until you were ready to tell me the truth."

Juliette gave her a sharp look. "What are you talking about? Who on earth could have told you anything?"

Pouring herself another cup of tea, Enjolé sweetened it and swirled it around with a silver spoon before she answered. "It may interest you to know that, shortly before you returned to Paris, I had tea one afternoon with the Marquis d'Ajasson."

"What?" There was no mistaking the shock in Juliette's voice.

"That is right. He called here thinking you were back in Paris. When I told him you were not, he looked so disappointed that I invited him to stay for tea. He confided everything to me, but if you must be angry with someone, then be angry at me . . . not that charming man!"

Juliette looked wistful. "Stephan? I don't think I could ever be angry with Stephan. Tell me, is he well?"

"*Oui!* He has been recuperating at his home in Vilaine," Enjolé replied. "Juliette, if only you had told me . . . confided in me." She sat down next to her, taking her hand. "Oh, *chérie*, to think that I ever encouraged you to marry that . . . that imposter! Can you ever forgive me?"

Juliette looked away from those pleading soft brown eyes.

"There is nothing to forgive," she replied stiffly. "We

all make mistakes, and I have no one but myself to blame for mine."

"You can imagine how concerned I have been," said Enjolé, squeezing Juliette's hand tighter to get her attention back. "When we heard of the tragic death of your husband, we could not believe it. Imagine, shot dead in his own home by looters. *Dieu!* What is the world coming to?"

Then, drawing an uncertain breath, Enjolé asked, "*Chérie*, tell me about him."

"Stephan?" Juliette said. "Well, he is kind and good. He is very handsome . . . but you saw that for yourself. And he—"

Enjolé interrupted her. "*Non*, not the Marquis d'Ajasson. Tell me about the Duke of Amherst, the real Duke of Amherst. The one the Marquis calls *le capitaine*."

Juliette withdrew her hand from Enjolé's at the unexpected mention of Christian Youngblood. "There is nothing to tell," she said, her face like stone. "He may be a duke, but he is also a rogue and a liar."

Immediately, Enjolé sensed the defensive wall Juliette had thrown up around her emotions. "Ah, *ma petite*, can it be that you are in love with this man?"

"In love with that . . . that pirate?" Juliette sprang to her feet, fists clenched tightly at her sides, emerald eyes blazing. "You would not ask it if you knew him! He is nothing but a common thief! He has deceived me time and time again and has brought nothing but misery into my life. Didn't Stephan tell you that it was Christian Youngblood who murdered my father? That it was Christian Youngblood who destroyed the Black Star Line?"

Enjolé lowered her eyes and nodded. "*Oui*, but the Marquis did not speak of him as though he were a monster."

"Perhaps that is because I know him in a way Stephan never can," said Juliette haughtily.

"That may be, *chérie*," responded her aunt, "but I see the same look in your eyes when you speak of him

that I saw in the Marquis d'Ajasson's. You are too proud and stubborn to admit it, but I know you too well, Juliette." She shook her head. "*Non*, perhaps you can fool yourself, but you cannot fool me. . . ."

Juliette had all day to think about this conversation with Enjolé. That night, as she lay awake in bed waiting for sleep, her aunt's words echoed through her mind. During the day she could go riding, or shopping, or find other ways to distract her thoughts. But at night with only silence for company there was nowhere to turn to avoid the truth. Oh God, she cried, weeping silently into her satin pillow. Yes, she loved him. Yes! And there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing. No way to eradicate the overwhelming loneliness that flooded her room each night and engulfed the bed, drawing her deep into its suffocating arms until she found herself praying for morning to come and dissolve the darkness of another lonely night . . .

She awoke the next morning to bright sunlight streaming through the tall windows, the first sunlight in many long days of gray clouds and rain.

A gentle tap on the door was followed quickly by the maid, Yvette, who entered and set to work preparing Juliette's bath. Singing as she worked, she heated water by the bucketful over the fire and poured it into the white porcelain bathtub that stood before the fireplace. When the tub was full, she bent to test the temperature and spill a few drops of Juliette's favorite oil into the steamy water.

"Time to get up!" Yvette called out.

Pretending not to hear, Juliette snuggled down deeper into the covers. She had no wish to face this day. Perhaps she would remain in bed.

But Yvette, guessing her mistress's intentions, pulled the covers from the bed in one sweep, exposing the slender body that lay curled up in a ball. Green eyes opened slowly and gave Yvette an unwelcoming look.

"Your bath is ready," the maid said. "Come before the water cools."

"Oh, all right," said Juliette, sitting up and stretching. "Just stop that awful singing. I cannot bear to have anyone so happy."

Yvette tried to look solemn for Juliette's sake.

Yawning, Juliette asked, "Is Tante Enjolé up yet?"

"Oh, *oui*, she has gone out for the day and will not be back until late."

"And I suppose you are to be my watchdog," Juliette remarked, dragging herself out of bed and trudging to the bathtub.

Yvette shrugged and looked away to hide a guilty look that confirmed Juliette's suspicions.

"As I thought. Well, you needn't worry. I have decided not to go riding today. In fact, I won't be going out at all."

The announcement brought a measure of relief to Yvette, although it did nothing to dispel her concern over her mistress's listless behavior. Where was the laughing, bright-eyed girl she had said goodbye to two years ago? What happened to the joy, the carefree chatter? Juliette still laughed and often said witty things, but Yvette sensed the sadness behind the laughter. Juliette still danced out of the house on the arms of some of France's most eligible and charming escorts, but the smiles she flashed at them were empty. Yvette sighed, wondering what it would take to bring Juliette back to her old self. This morning not even the sun shining brightly at last seemed to be enough to do the trick.

"Will you be doing the marketing this morning?" Juliette asked not really caring particularly.

"*Oui*," responded Yvette, "I must leave in a few moments. I will be stopping by the *pâtisserie*," she added, slyly remembering Juliette's fondness for sweet, creamy cakes. "Do you wish something special? *Gateau au chocolat*? *Vacherin aux fraises* . . .?"

Juliette's voice came from somewhere in the folds of the nightdress she was trying to pull over her head. "Anything special that I might wish for would certainly

not be found in chocolate cake or a strawberry meringue." With the gown off and tossed aside, she stepped gingerly into the steaming hot water.

Yvette hesitated. "Do you wish me to stay and help you dress?"

"That won't be necessary," Juliette replied, easing into the water and closing her eyes to the penetrating vapors. "But there is something you *can* do . . . would you wind the music box for me?"

With a tender smile, Yvette obliged. Removing a small key from beneath the lace runner on Juliette's dressing table, she wound the delicately gilded box with enough turns to keep her mistress pleasantly entertained during her bath.

Juliette bathed with slow, rhythmic strokes in time to the soft orchestration that came from the box. The gentle notes of the popular children's tune, "*Il pleut, il pleut bergere*," floated through the air, a simple melody that always had a calming effect on her. The music box had belonged to her mother. Of all her possessions, even the magnificent Kenmare jewels she had left behind in England and which were rightfully hers, this was Juliette's favorite.

She emerged, dripping, teeth clattering, only when the music box ran down. By then the water was cold. With goosebumps racing across her naked flesh, she hurried to the dresser to wind the box again, then snatched at the towel Yvette had placed by the tub. A brisk rubdown warmed her blood and gave her skin a rosy glow. Humming softly along with the music, she sat down at her dressing table, still naked. A light pull on the green velvet ribbon that held her hair atop her head brought the dark silken mass tumbling down about her shoulders.

She reached for the silver hairbrush on the table and raised it above her head. Two long strokes was as far as she got, however, as she suddenly became aware of another reflection in the mirror besides her own.

The brush froze in mid-air and the breath froze in her throat. Leaning casually against the doorframe, smiling

that insufferable arrogant smile of his, was Christian Youngblood. He looked as if he had been there for quite some time and was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Juliette's first impulse was to run to him and throw herself into his arms. She did not. One glimpse of that mocking smile, those blue eyes laughing at her confusion chased the desire from her heart. Slamming down the hairbrush, she whirled around to face him.

"You! What are you doing here? Didn't I tell you I never wanted to see you again!"

He came forward, eyes exploring her nakedness, adding a blush of embarrassment to the flush of anger already tinting her cheeks.

"As a matter of fact, that was about all you said to me during our journey back to France from England," he reminded her. "I must say, you have an extraordinary knack for turning the air inside a coach to ice without uttering a sound."

"That's right," Juliette retorted, "and even that was too good for the likes of you!"

She purposely was trying to behave like a shrew, anything to distract him from her nakedness. Not that she was embarrassed to be seen by him—indeed, by now there was not an inch of her body that he did not know by heart. But she could not bear up under that look of desire in those devil blue eyes, not when she was so angry with him. She rose, deliberately turning her back on him, and walked over to her armoire.

"Your presence here is not wanted," she said, pulling out a white satin robe and slipping it on. Tying the sash at her waist, she took a step toward him then stopped, not daring to get too close to him.

He watched her, a sour look on his face. "You certainly are not at your charming best, Juliette. Don't you think you've sulked long enough? It's been over a month since we returned to France. I hear you've wasted no time drawing attention to yourself. That's not very wise under the circumstances, don't you agree?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" she demanded. She turned her back on him.

"It means, my love, that you have all of Paris talking about you, just as you had all of England talking about you. While your husband was alive, it was a different story. But . . . well . . . a widow usually spends a bit more time in mourning. Why, I'll bet you don't even own a black dress." He shook his head in mock disapproval, a gesture that infuriated Juliette.

"And who was it who made me a widow?" she challenged him. "First you took away my father, then my ships, and then my husband! Why are you so intent on stripping my life bare?"

The mocking smile vanished abruptly. He took a step forward and stopped. Instantly the playful look was gone from his eyes as their midday blue turned to midnight, warning Juliette of the storm to come. When he spoke, his voice growled at her from somewhere deep in his throat.

"I will not apologize for killing your father. If I hadn't killed him, he would have killed me. As for the ships, as I understand it, they were willed to the Duke of Amherst, not to you, and I can dispose of my property any way I choose. I owe you no apology or explanation, just as you chose not to explain to me your reasons for marrying Trevor, just as you have never apologized for claiming to love me, back at Tirana, when your pretty little neck was in danger, only to deny it later and make a complete fool of me." He took a menacing step toward her; instinctively, she backed away.

"I can take all of that," he said, his ice-blue stare chilling Juliette to the bone. "I can stand all the names you call me and the things you accuse me of, but I'll not tolerate the suggestion that I killed Trevor. You know damned well I didn't!"

Juliette gave him a nasty look. "Oh? Do I really know that?"

Christian would have seized her by the arm, but she slipped out of his reach.

"What kind of game are you playing?" Christian was furious. "You were there! You saw it all! You saw the bullet I found in the tree! What are you up to, you witch!"

In two long strides he covered the distance between them and reached for her before she could escape. Hands gripping her shoulders tightly, fingers digging painfully into her flesh, he shook her hard, whipping her dark hair about wildly.

"I didn't kill him!" he shouted.

Juliette's eyes glared into his, her hands shoved against his chest trying to push him away. But Christian's hands now slipped from her shoulders and his arms wound around her, drawing her close. Bending his face toward hers, he began to kiss her savagely.

She had half-expected him to strike her, but this frightened her more. Pulling her lips from his, she cried, "Stop this! I hate you for this!"

Christian laughed harshly. "Ah, yes," he said mockingly, "that's what you keep telling me. But I told you at the very beginning, didn't I, that your eyes say something else. At the moment, I prefer to believe what those green jewels are telling me."

She began to struggle, but he bent his head and was kissing her again, long and hard, his fingers twined in her hair to keep her from pulling her head away.

Juliette had tried to forget what this man's kisses could do to her—the way his lips burned against hers, seeming to take possession of her entire being, forcing a response from her that she was powerless to withhold. Her head bent back now under the savage fury of his kiss, she was acutely aware of his hard-muscled body pressed tightly against hers. Oh, why did it always have to be like this? Why did the touch of his fingers have such power over her? Worse, why was she too weak to resist her own body's passionate demands?

She was breathless and almost beyond reason when the kiss ended and Christian released her. Taking a step back, he placed his hands on his hips and stood gazing at her. One shoulder was bare where her robe had

slipped off. Reaching out, he tapped the shoulder and said, "You'd better do something about that, or I may take it as an invitation."

Juliette jerked the robe back into place. How dare he! How dare he! He was truly the most arrogant man she had *ever* known!

Once again she faced him squarely, eyes bright with indignation. "Why have you come here? To trick or deceive me in yet another way?"

Christian was secretly delighted with the display of temper. God, she was beautiful with her face flushed, her hair all tossed, and her emerald eyes sparkling like green ice. Suppressing the urge to take her then and there, Christian sauntered past her to the window.

Speaking over his shoulder, he said, "I came to Paris to tell you that you must leave at once. It is not safe for you here."

"You're insanel!" she cried.

He turned back to the room and gave her a mirthless smile. "Am I? Uncle Freddy is on his way to Paris."

Juliette gasped. "How do you know that?"

"It's my business to know things that most people don't, or have you forgotten?"

With a toss of her head, Juliette turned away. "Well? What does it matter if Lord Alfred comes here?"

"Now listen to me, Juliette," Christian said, tired now of her stubbornness. "He knows that, under the circumstances, I cannot return to England to claim the title and my inheritance. That means that as Trevor's widow, it's all yours now. Uncle Freddy must be desperate at this point, so close to it all and yet so far. He'll never let it slip through his fingers without a fight."

Unbidden, Juliette's mind slipped back to the night of her confrontation with Lord Alfred in the study at Amherst Hall. She couldn't believe her situation was as alarming as Christian was trying to make it out to be, but, nevertheless, Lord Alfred Clairborne was not someone she was eager to see again. Why was he

coming all the way to Paris, she wondered. Was he looking to make a bargain?

"Perhaps if I spent a few weeks in the country," she suggested. "Tante Enjolé has a gentleman friend who has a small house in Montreuil. . . ."

"No," Christian shook his head. "I'm sending you to Statia. It's the only place where you'll be safe. If my uncle managed to track me down when he had every reason to believe me dead, he'll manage to have no trouble finding you in the country. Now, listen carefully. There's a ship leaving Lorient in a week—the captain is a friend of mine. You can trust him to get you safely to Statia. Once there, I've instructed him to take you to another friend who will put you up in a room and see that you have whatever you need. It won't be as glamorous as what you're used to, *your Grace*," he added, obviously laughing at her, "but it will be safe."

Really, his arrogance was appalling! Still, Juliette considered the plan.

"It will take me a few days to get ready. I'll have to—"

"You don't have a few days," he said. "You've got to leave *now*."

Juliette's bewilderment now gave way to annoyance. Damn him and his infernal habit of telling her what she was and was not going to do! Now he was ordering her to leave for an island in the Caribbean that nobody had ever heard of. Was it just another of his tricks?

"What about you?" she asked suddenly suspicious.

"I'll follow you in about a month," he replied. "I received a message to meet with Franklin at his home in Passay . . . something must be up. But I'll escort you to Lorient, don't worry about that. Then as soon as I take care of whatever Franklin wants of me, I'll meet you in Statia."

She barely heard him: her mind was racing ahead with a million questions. "But Tante Enjolé! What will I tell her? She will never approve!"

"Then you had better not be here when she returns."

It will avoid unnecessary explanations. Does she know what happened?"

"She thinks she does," answered Juliette. "She managed to find out most of it, but she still doesn't know the truth about what happened to Trevor." For some reason she did not think she should mention Stephan's visit.

"All right, look," said Christian, "why don't you leave her a note telling her you decided to spend a few weeks in the country. On my way back from Lorient, I'll stop in and explain things to her."

As he spoke, he strode over to Juliette's armoire, pulled the mirrored door open and inspected the contents. He shook his head. "None of these will do, where are your summer things?"

"Not in there," Juliette exclaimed indignantly, reaching past him to slam the door shut. "Why would I need summer clothes in the middle of winter?"

"Because Statia is not Paris, my sweet. It's hot there. Now, where are they . . . in there?" Without waiting for a reply, he walked over to an oak chest and jerked open a drawer.

"This will do," he said, pulling out a flimsy summer nightdress, "and this. Where do you keep the dresses?"

With a stiff nod, Juliette indicated a wardrobe closet. Christian worked quickly then, selecting several diaphanous dresses. As he turned from the closet, his arm draped with dresses, his eye was caught by a garment hanging on the inside of the door. It was a stunning evening cape of creamy silk satin trimmed with Chantilly lace and velvet.

"And this," he said, half to himself lifting the cape carefully from its scented hanger.

Juliette pulled her traveling case to the center of the room and began folding the articles he had selected. For a moment, he stood watching her. Then reaching past her from behind, he removed a garment from her hand and placed it aside.

"You can do that later," he said softly, his lips touching her ear.

"But you said we must hurry!"

He laughed, drawing her into his arms. "I know what I said."

His hand slipped inside the front of her dressing gown to caress her small firm breasts. The French are right, he was thinking. A woman's breasts are perfect when they will fit into a champagne glass. And this woman's breasts were like champagne to him, the taste of them producing the same dizzying effects. He lowered his head to taste their incredible sweetness.

Juliette's robe lay now in a soft pile at her feet.

"Why do you make it so hard for me to resist you?" Christian breathed against her skin as he kissed each pink nipple. Then, he lifted her in his arms to carry her to the bed. "If someone had told me the devil had green eyes, I never would have believed it. That is, until I met you."

He flung her down on the bed and removed his shirt without once taking his eyes off her. She held out her arms to him and pulled him passionately to her. Resisting and struggling beneath him, she was like a cyclone raging through his blood. But softly yielding as she now made him oblivious to all thoughts but one . . . the intense, burning desire to possess her, to claim her as his own just as he had done the first time.

All too soon, the passion they shared raged to a roaring climax. Juliette's body arched up to meet his, just as hungry, just as desperate, just as wildly impatient as his. Reluctantly, he withdrew from her. "Now," he murmured, caressing her thighs, "we must hurry . . ."

While Juliette packed her bag, he lay stretched out naked on her bed, one arm bent behind his head, watching her.

This unpredictable, green-eyed vixen had somehow managed to slip under his skin. She had fought him from the very beginning. At every turn, she was forever testing him. Just like his other lady love, the *Rebel*, she too, needed a strong hand to keep her under control. What had begun as an attraction for another

beautiful woman had slowly turned into an obsession that gave him no peace, bringing stabs of jealousy to a heart that had never expected to suffer because of a woman. And never had . . . until now.

She was a sorceress working an evil spell. She was a dangerous drug poisoning him just as surely and fatally as opium poisoned his brother. She was like no other woman he had ever known, her beauty capable of driving a man to distraction and turning him not only against his friends, but against himself too. But it was more than beauty that drew him to her. She would ask for the truth and reject it. She would carelessly cut him and laugh as he lay bleeding. At times he wanted to hate her, but he found himself loving her and most of all, wanting her . . . always wanting her . . .

One week later, they stood on the frozen dock waiting for the small boat that would take Juliette out to the ship. Christian wound his arms tightly about her and felt her body tremble even beneath the heavy wool cape she wore. Their breath steamed and the tears that slid silently from Juliette's green eyes froze against her cheeks.

"A month," he whispered, his lips against her ear. "I'll follow you in a month."

His lips touched hers, tenderly at first, then harder and more demanding as the time for her departure drew near. Releasing her, Christian stood back to watch as she was helped into the dingy and rowed to the three-masted schooner that lay at anchor, waiting only for this passenger to board before setting sail for St. Eustatia.

Turning, Christian Youngblood stalked from the dock to his waiting carriage, grumbling, "Franklin had better have a damned good reason for wanting to see me!"

Climbing into the carriage, he slammed the door shut and ordered the driver back to Paris.

Chapter 35

He was sitting in an overstuffed armchair, a heavy volume opened on his lap, eyes peering through the spectacles that were so much a part of him. A discreet cough from the doorway brought his head up. Squinting through his glasses for a better look at his visitor, he grew instantly impatient and pulled the spectacles from his head.

"Confound it," he exclaimed, "someday I will just have to invent a remedy for this never-ending inconvenience. Without the blasted things I cannot read and with them I cannot see. It would seem to me that what is needed here is a sort of bifocal to serve both functions. One of these days I'll get to work on it. Ah, Christian, it's you. Don't just stand there . . . come in."

Christian Youngblood walked into the elegant crimson and gold room, looking about him casually. Mahogany bookshelves lined the walls, crammed with books. There were paintings and tapestries; gifts from admiring friends. Indeed, the entire room reflected the man.

At the age of 75, Ben Franklin was perhaps the most popular individual on two continents. At home in the American colonies, he was greeted as a man of high accomplishment and the symbol of an ideal. Abroad, in France, where his portrait was embellished on medallions and porcelain cups, he served as the epitome of all that was simple, good, and wise. To the French he was the essence of what America was, and it was probably

his presence in the country that contributed most to the overwhelming support the American cause received throughout France. Whenever he appeared in public he was mobbed by adoring crowds. At his home in Passay, he was host to a continuous stream of French aristocrats, beautiful women, American patriots, and the curious who wanted only a glimpse of him.

On this particular afternoon in early March of 1781, though a volume of French poetry lay in his lap, Benjamin Franklin's thoughts had been elsewhere. It was John Paul Jones who commanded his attention today. Though that had nothing to do with his reasons for summoning Christian Youngblood, Franklin was quite determined to have his say about the American Naval officer.

"I was hoping some soothing French verse would quell the apprehension I have for that man," Franklin remarked, putting the book aside and gesturing for Christian to take the seat across from him.

Looking at him questioningly, Christian said, "Oh? Has John Paul been giving you trouble lately?"

"Of a sort, yes. The cry of Versailles and the clamor of Paris have grown as loud in favor of Captain Jones as for myself." He gave Christian a wry look.

Smiling broadly at this lack of modesty, Christian said, "That may be, but John Paul will never possess a farthing of your humility."

The sardonic observation was allowed to pass.

"Poor John Paul," sighed Franklin. "Once again he was forced to stand idle while repairs were made on his ship. You heard, I am sure, that she just barely survived a storm that wrecked vessels and drowned men all along the coast of Brittany? You would think a man as popular with the ladies would have found a better way to spend his free time than to rap incessantly at my door begging to be put to sea!" Franklin shook his head and sighed. "It is unfortunate, really, but as frustrating as it must be for him to spend month after month on land trying to get command of a good ship, his career is a typical reflection of the lack of organiza-

tion of the naval aspects of this war. It can only be considered gross negligence on the part of both the French and ourselves to waste so much of John Paul's unique imagination and naval skills."

While Franklin made his little speech, the butler entered and placed a crystal glass on the table beside him and a tankard of port beside Christian. The butler knew without having to ask what each of Monsieur Franklin's guests preferred. Over the rim of the tankard, Christian watched Franklin, thinking that the old man was quick witted and lively as ever, and wishing he'd get around to why he'd brought him here.

"You seamen can be such an ornery lot at times," Franklin was saying now. "Fortunately, John Paul is now on his way to Philadelphia, and out of my hair."

"Can it be that you do not care to share your popularity with a mere naval captain?" Christian suggested.

"Nonsense!" said Franklin, round eyes twinkling. "I do not care to share it with *anyone*!"

Throwing his head back, Christian laughed lustily. "So you packed John Paul off to Philadelphia, and what plans do you have for me, may I ask?"

Franklin looked at him slyly. "Ah, now you, my dear fellow, are quite a different matter. You manage to find your own adventures quite without my help or my knowledge . . . or my blessings, for that matter. I generally find it necessary to employ every trick known to mankind just to track you down."

He paused and gave Christian a stern look. "Really, Christian. England, indeed! Whatever possessed you to go there? After all, my influence extends just so far. I rather doubt that King George and his ministers would entertain any personal requests from their former colonial agent were you to find yourself in a British prison. Your safety is your own concern, of course. Far be it from me to stand in your way if you have such an urge to get yourself killed. But there is more than just your life at stake here. Too many years have been devoted to developing an intelligence system whose

network is so complicated that even I have trouble remembering it, and I invented the confounded thing! Your capture could result in the fatal crack in our defensive wall that we have thus far avoided."

"The capture of any of our men could achieve the same result," Christian said, going on the defensive.

"That is correct, but I would prefer that my agents refrain from handing themselves over to the enemy on a silver platter, if you don't mind," Franklin said.

A look of annoyance crossed Christian's face. "I'll keep that in mind. Now, do you want to tell me how you found out I was in England?"

"Certainly." Franklin nodded, taking a sip of brandy. "I made a personal visit to Vilaine when I heard that the Marquis had arrived back in France in less than perfect shape. He is lucky to be alive, although when I saw him he did not appear to be enthusiastic about the prospect. I suspected that the pain I saw in his eyes was not caused so much by the wound in his chest as by something he would not say. He seemed to have a great deal of difficulty when speaking about you, Christian. Why was that, I wonder? Would you care to enlighten me?"

"It's a personal matter." Christian glowered down at the floor.

"I see," said Franklin dryly. "As I recall, that's precisely what you told me when you wiped Monsieur Delacroix off the face of the earth. For a man with so few family ties, Christian, you seem to have many personal matters to attend to."

Blue eyes glared at him. "Has it ever interfered with my work?"

"No, it has not," Franklin admitted, "and that is why you are a double mystery to me. After much consideration, I have concluded that if I, in my youth, had possessed only a fragment of that wild and impetuous nature of yours combined with my own natural abilities, I would have surpassed my own expectations for myself."

Benjamin Franklin was the only man Christian

Youngblood knew who could make such a remark and get away with it. In spite of his previous annoyance, Christian found himself grinning.

Franklin finished his brandy, rose and walked to the mantel where he tugged lightly on the bell rope. "I do hope your personal affairs are settled now so that we may get on with business at hand." He shuffled back to his chair, silver-buckled shoes brushing across the Oriental carpet. "Knowing your love for devilry, you will be interested to learn that England has finally declared war on the Netherlands. My sources confide that on December 21st a ship left England with orders for Admiral Rodney in the Caribbean. On January 27th, those orders were handed to him on St. Lucia. He is seize all Dutch possessions in the Caribbean at once."

The color drained from Christian Youngblood's face. "Statia?"

"Above all Statia," said Franklin, "because not only is she rich, but she has been overtly helping England's enemies. My guess is he should have little trouble taking the island, and I shudder to think what will be left when Rodney is finished." Franklin spoke, oblivious to the startling change in Christian Youngblood. Had he been looking, he would have noticed the pale face and startled eyes. But he was too preoccupied with the fresh glass of plum brandy the butler had just brought in. By the time he took a sip and looked at his visitor, Christian was standing at the window, his back to the room.

"Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise," Franklin said, thinking out loud. "With Rodney occupied in Statia, perhaps now our French friend, Admiral de Grasse, can slip around the tip of Martinique and join the rest of the French fleet at Fort Royal. De Grasse's safe arrival will be crucial to his appearance off the Virginia Capes this fall when we have a defensive action planned.

"That brings me to the reason I have summoned you." The figure at the window stirred but did not turn

to look at him. "I want you to sail at once for the Virginia Capes. You must be there to meet de Grasse's fleet in the fall. He will need all the help he can get. Washington and Lafayette would like to think that the decisive battle of this war will be fought on land, but I have long suspected that it will be a sea battle. The irony of it all is that with American naval power so pitifully ineffective, the fate of our independence could be in the hands of the French and English fleets. I tell you, Christian, at times I cannot quite decide if it is laughter or tears that life's little ironies are designed to evoke in me."

Christian turned from the window then. "I don't want to join de Grasse. I want to go to Statia."

If Franklin was surprised, he didn't show it. "Any particular reason?"

"It's—" Christian began and stopped.

"Yes, I know," Franklin said, "it's personal. I should have guessed."

In the tense minutes that followed, Franklin nursed his brandy while he watched the young man pace about the room.

"I hear she is very beautiful," Franklin said at last, breaking the silence only when there was no more brandy in his glass to distract him. Answering Christian's puzzled look, he said, "She must be a remarkable woman to warrant an attack on a Turkish pasha's palace to rescue her. I am thankful that the Anatolia mission was not sacrificed because of your foolhardiness. I often wondered if you possessed the same weaknesses as we mortal men. I am pleased to discover that you do. I suppose the lady has something to do with your request to go to Statia?"

Christian approached him then. "I'm going to Statia," he said, "with your blessings or without."

Franklin sighed and glanced toward the french windows that opened into the garden. In the summer, the garden was full of colorful bloom, but today, in the dead of winter, it was lifeless and dull.

"I suppose it might be wise to keep an eye on Sir

Rodney as he frolics in his rape of Statia. Very well then, consider St. Eustatia your next assignment. But only on one condition—that you do not go alone.”

Christian glanced at him with suspicion, instantly on the alert. What was the old fox up to now? He waited tensely for Franklin to deliver his terms.

“You will take the Marquis d’Ajasson with you.”

Christian Youngblood fought hard to keep his emotions under control. The startling news of Statia’s capture had jolted him. At this very moment Juliette was on her way there, and he had no one but himself to blame for sending her into a trap from which she might not be able to escape. That he and Stephan should race to Statia to her rescue should have been laughable, but the thought of it blinded him with fury. Christian would never forget the words he had heard from that Frenchman’s own lips. Yes, he thought, Stephan would like nothing better than to accompany him on this mission.

“All right,” Christian heard himself say, “I’ll pick him up on my way to Lorient.”

But in the privacy of his own mind, Christian Youngblood made a vow that Benjamin Franklin could know nothing of. He would not make this mission an easy one for the Marquis d’Ajasson, he swore. Blast it! If Stephan wanted Juliette, he was in for one hell of a fight!

Chapter 36

Three days after receiving his orders, Admiral Sir George Rodney sailed for St. Eustatia, armed with a dozen ships of the line. His attack came swiftly, like a clap of thunder, and the *New Dutch World*, unaware that war had been declared on them, offered no resistance. With Statia's defenses amounting to a garrison of less than sixty men, one frigate and a handful of smaller vessels, she fell without so much as a whimper. Within the hour, the Governor surrendered unconditionally.

The Dutch flag was kept flying over the port to lure into harbor those merchant captains ignorant of the latest turn of events. One by one they docked their ships at the roadstead only to be promptly relieved of both ship and goods.

Benjamin Franklin's assessment of Admiral Rodney proved kind, to say the least. He secured for the British crown the 130 merchant ships in the harbor and stuffed their contents into already over-stuffed warehouses. Soon even the beaches were littered with barrels of sugar and bales of tobacco.

Rodney was furious with Statia's governors for allowing—and indeed contributing to—the appalling antics of the American rebels. In the course of expressing his anger he lost little time in laying the island to waste. All residents, civilian and military, Dutch, American, or neutral were treated as prisoners of war. All private property was confiscated regardless of the owner's nationality. All warehouses not packed with

confiscated goods were ordered destroyed. Dutch, American, French even British merchants lost everything, including the records that would have permitted them to file compensation claims after the war. The island's Jewish population was transported with barely the shirts on their backs. French merchants, faring just slightly better, were carted off to French islands.

Rodney did little to endear himself to the watching world. By ignoring an act of Parliament and imprisoning noncombatants and mates and masters of American merchant ships, he came under the attack of his own government which could neither believe nor condone his unorthodox and exceedingly harsh disposition of the wealth and populace of St. Eustatia. Just how much, if anything, he profited by the rape of the island was uncertain, but he made certain that the Golden Rock of the Caribbean would never again be what it was.

From the window of the second floor of the house which had been put at his disposal, Lord Alfred Clairborne looked out beyond the palm trees and the white beach to the roadstead white with sails. Each day, while the Dutch flag continued to fly over the captive island of St. Eustatia, he watched some unsuspecting vessel tack into the harbor approach. Each day England claimed another spoil of war.

Lord Alfred rubbed his hands together as his mind filled with thoughts of his own spoils. He was inching closer, bit by torturous bit, to the fulfillment of his dream. The nearer he drew, the more obsessed he became with it. His plans were moving full speed ahead, like a ship with the wind trapped in her sails. A sudden storm could send that ship to its doom, he cautioned himself, but he pushed the unpleasant thought from his mind, confident that he had seen to everything, had left nothing to chance. And so far, so good.

One of the most satisfying aspects of his scheme had been convincing Christian that he was on his way to Paris. Lord Alfred chuckled at his cleverness. A few

words in the right places and it was inevitable that his nephew would come to the desired conclusion. And, as Lord Alfred had guessed, the most likely decision—to send Juliette to Statia. Lord Alfred breathed in deeply at the thought of that victory. Now he had only to wait.

One week later, the ship he awaited finally dropped anchor. Standing at the window, Lord Alfred clapped his hands in glee like a greedy child, confident that nothing could stop him now. Later that evening, meticulously attired in the finest clothing he had brought from England, a half-dozen rings adorning his pale, thin hands, he sat back in a chair, a goblet of wine in his hands. He glanced around critically. Not quite Amherst Hall or Rampart Row, but adequate.

The sheer curtains billowed out as the gentle sea breeze swept through the open window. While half the world shivered in the grip of winter, the world outside his window was filled with the splendor of summertime. On this night, it was particularly fragrant with the scent of the tropics.

A knock on the door alerted him. A head peeked in first, then the body followed. "She has arrived, your Lordship," a voice said tremulously. Lord Alfred was glad he had not lighted more than one lamp. The darkness would be a decided advantage.

"Good," he told the servant. "You may send her in, and then you may have the rest of the night off."

The implication was obvious. Clairborne was satisfied that the servant had no doubt as to the purpose of the lady's visit. It would arouse suspicion and prompt too many questions if anyone discovered who Juliette really was. Best to let them think her a common whore, a well-paid woman of pleasure who came at his beckoning.

The door opened again and she stepped into the room. She hesitated a moment, then moved toward where he sat in the shadows. He waited, letting her draw closer. When he judged that her eyes were becoming accustomed to the dimness, he greeted her.

"Good evening my dear."

Juliette felt the blood drain from her face and limbs, leaving her suddenly cold and shaking. Her hand flew to her mouth, knuckles pressed against her teeth.

"You seem surprised," Clairborne commented, "but surely not as surprised as I was at your hasty departure from England. Why, my dear, you never even said goodbye."

Juliette swallowed hard and drew in an uncertain breath. She had to keep her wits about her. Dear God, what was *he* doing here? He was supposed to be in Paris! Summoning every bit of courage she had, she managed to maintain an appearance of calm although inside she trembled. With deliberate nonchalance she unfastened her traveling cloak and removed it from her shoulders.

"I am surprised to see you here. Your Lordship must surely know that Englishmen are not tolerated on this island."

Lord Alfred felt a pinprick of annoyance. So, she was as defiant as ever. "For your information," he said, "Eustatia is now in British hands. You are standing on British soil."

Her composure failed her. "But that's not—it's not possible! He said . . . he told me—"

"He? Can it be that you are referring to my nephew, Christian?" He shook his head in mock dismay. "Really, Juliette, do not tell me you still manage to be taken in by his lies. I thought you would have learned by now that he is not to be trusted."

Her initial shock and bewilderment at finding Lord Alfred here was rapidly giving way to the anger. "And you are, I suppose?" For the briefest moment, Juliette glimpsed in his face the same detachment that had been part of Trevor's make-up. She shivered.

"Judge for yourself," he replied. "Did he tell you he had murdered your father? Was it he who told you about his title? No doubt he assured you that this island was the safest place in the world for you. From whom have you learned the truth? The facts are there before you."

Green eyes shot him a look of hate. "Do you think I would believe anything *you* say? I have not traveled halfway around the world to listen to a murderer!" She whirled around to leave, her skirts swirling about her ankles, but his voice stopped her.

"Those are harsh words," he said, "but they only prove to me how foolish you really are."

Juliette slowly turned to face him, green eyes narrowed into bits of cut glass.

"The long journey has clouded your mind," Lord Alfred went on. "You are overtired. On that account I will overlook your rudeness."

"Overtired?" She laughed harshly. "Was I overtired that morning when Trevor and Christian prepared to face each other? When it was not quite dawn but the light from the stars was enough to recognize your carriage as it turned into the stable?" She saw a glimmer of interest spark in his eyes. "Everything was happening so fast then," Juliette went on. "I had been up all night pleading with them not to go through with it. My head ached so and I could not sleep. Just before dawn I went to the window and I saw something—a horse or a carriage, I wasn't sure which—enter the stable. Just then I heard Christian come out of his room. In the confusion that followed, I put it out of my mind. It was not until much later that I was able to put the pieces together and realized who had killed Trevor. It was *your* carriage I saw enter the stable that morning. Oh God, if only I had known then! If only I had realized before it was too late! Yes, you are a murderer! You murdered your own nephew!"

Lord Alfred listened to her story in silent fury. So she knew! The little bitch knew! Well, that settled it. If there had been any doubt in his mind before this evening as to what to do with her, it was all settled now. The ninny had sealed her own fate.

"Spare me the dramatics, Juliette," he said harshly, rising from his chair. "I am not interested in your hysterical suspicions at the moment. I am here to strike a bargain with you."

Juliette's cheeks were still hot with anger. "Bargain . . . for what?"

Reaching into his pocket he drew out a neatly folded paper. "I think you will find it all in order," he said, handing it to her.

She took it, opened it and read it. She looked up at him in amazement.

"This is a deed to Amherst Hall and its contents! You expect me to sign this and give everything to you?"

He nodded.

"And if I don't?"

He came forward then, the same evil look in his eyes that Juliette remembered from the night he had bargained with her for Christian's life.

"Ah," he said, "now we come to the heart of the matter. Not only do I have something to gain from this, but you, my dear, profit quite handsomely."

She eyed him warily, afraid to ask. "And what do I get?"

Clairborne smiled, a mirthless expression that would have fooled no one. "Your life."

The answer hit Juliette with the physical force of a blow. There it was, if she did not give up her claim to the Amherst inheritance, she would never leave this island . . . perhaps this room . . . alive. The cruel irony of it was that she had never really wanted any part of Amherst for herself—not the estate, not the jewels, not even the name.

"How do I know you will not kill me anyway?" she asked, already half-resigned to the dismal possibility.

"If you sign that paper tonight, I will leave the island in the morning," he told her.

"And what will happen to me?"

Lord Alfred shrugged. "I am giving you your life, my dear. What you do with it after I am gone is your own affair. You might wish to consider, however, that St. Eustatia is currently teeming with seamen—Admirals and the like—not to mention all those soldiers deposited ashore. Surely a woman of your resources will not have too bad a time of it here."

Juliette fought back a sob at the insulting implication. As if it were not enough, he added:

"Do not attempt to sway them by claiming to be a duchess. They have already been informed that you are just another self-seeking pseudo-aristocrat whose specialty lies in offering herself to the highest bidder. The fools are convinced you are my current mistress, a prospect that I am sure delights you. When I leave here, I will simply explain that your diverse preferences have simply drained my purse, and you will be fair game for all of them. Who knows? Perhaps if you perform particularly well, you might even convince one of them to give you passage back to France."

She listened to this sickening speech knowing that the fate he had prepared for her was surely worse than any knife he might have plunged into her heart. He was turning her into a common whore.

Somehow, Juliette found herself seated at the writing table, her fingers grasped around the quill pen Lord Alfred placed in her hand, the deed face up in front of her.

"But . . . but how can I sign this?" she said, thinking aloud.

Clairborne was growing impatient. "How can you not?" he reminded her.

She slammed the pen down on the desk. "Because it is not mine to give away! It is Christian's signature you need on this paper. He holds the title to all you hunger for!"

The muscles tightened in Clairborne's jaw. "But as long as I live he will never be able to set foot in England to claim it. Besides, he is not fit for it. Look at what he had done to *you*, how he had lied to you and concealed the truth from you time and time again!"

"No!" moaned Juliette. "I can't believe what you say about him is true. There must be a reason . . . there must be!"

"Oh, there is," said Clairborne. "There most certainly is. I'm surprised you haven't figured it out by now. Oh, Christian wants it all right—the house, the

inheritance, the jewels—but not for himself. He covets it for the price it will bring at auction. Expensive goods can be turned into money and that money can buy a great deal of arms for the rebels. Oh, he is as scurrilous as the rest of them! The kind of man who uses people, especially beautiful women. Count them! Count the ways he has used you!”

As he spoke he pressed the pen into her hand again. He did not dare give her time to think. “Why do you think he sent you here? Why didn’t he bring you himself? He knew it was a trap all along. He has used you, Juliette! Here is your chance to revenge yourself, to hurt him the way he has hurt you!”

Tears blinded her, and she no longer knew what, or who, to believe. Everything he said was true. All those things he said about Christian . . . the countless ways he had deceived her . . . all true! A muffled sob broke from her. She grabbed for the pen and scribbled her name across the page. Before the ink was even dry, Lord Alfred snatched the deed up and slipped it back into his pocket.

“Very good. I only wish you could have done it without such an emotional display.”

His tone was suddenly impersonal, totally business-like. Returning to his chair, he took a long sip of wine before speaking again.

“By the way,” he said, looking over to where Juliette sat hunched over, face in her hands, weeping silently, “I have changed my mind about leaving. This pleasant climate is working miracles for my rheumatism, so you will have to endure my company a little longer.”

Juliette’s head snapped up and she turned to face him. “But you said—”

“I have changed my mind,” he repeated.

It was easy to read what was in her mind by the wild look in her eyes.

“Come now, Juliette, did you really think I meant to kill you myself? All I meant was that if you did not sign the deed, I would turn you over to the authorities as a French spy. They executed one here just the other day,

a woman. Very pretty too. Sir Rodney has little tolerance for that sort of thing, you know. Now, as long as I choose to remain on St. Eustatia, you shall live in this house with me. How you amuse yourself and with whom is your own business. I would recommend a hearty time of it. After all, the people on this island have been led to expect it of you. Your room is the second on the left at the top of the stairs. You may go to it now. Goodnight. . . ."

That night Juliette lay awake, sobbing over the bitter irony that had made her a virtual prisoner of a cruel and heartless man. On the voyage to Statia, for the first time in months, she had felt free . . . free of the watchful eyes of the court gossips, free of the horrors of the past, free of her own doubts and fears. She was on her way to an enchanting island where nothing could hurt her. Ha! She had to laugh bitterly now between the tears and the pain. She was no more free than a caged bird.

Juliette wept that night convinced of the hopelessness of her situation. But, gradually, as one night melted into another and another until she finally lost count, her tears dried. She saw little of Lord Alfred. He put no restraints on her coming and goings, although she knew from the stares she drew when she went into town that he had been quite efficient in planting God only knew what ideas about her in everyone's minds. After weeks of incessant scrutiny, Juliette decided to really give them something to talk about.

She began to throw elaborate parties to which she invited the island's most influential residents. Admiral Rodney she found a bit too blustery and callous, but there were several of his junior officers whose constant attention made her life on Statia tolerable.

Through carefully planted hints, she managed to leave each man she met with the impression that she was currently sleeping with another. While her reputation suffered for it, her body remained out of their reach. In the weeks that followed, she played her

admirers skillfully, one against the other, stringing them along heartlessly. She left them panting, their tongues hanging out like hungry dogs. At the right moment, she thought with resignation, she would lure the right one into her bed. And in return for her body, would buy her passage back to France.

Chapter 37

Two men, dressed all in white, mesh face guards over their heads concealing their features, moved about the courtyard in a strange ballet, sunlight reflecting off the blades of their sabers. With rapid movements they flicked at each other, the sabers living things in their skilled hands.

Parry, thrust, a quick feint to the left and one man's saber flew from his hands and went spinning across the courtyard. He ran to it, grasped it up, and whirled to face his opponent again.

"*En garde!*" he cried, assuming the classic fencer's pose, one foot before the other, knees bent, sword arm bent at the elbow. In the next moment the sabers clashed, the sound of metal striking metal sending the hot flush of excitement racing through Christian Youngblood as he watched.

Like the tongues of vipers the blades flicked at each other, each deceptively at ease. The blades slashed, lunged, pivoted, and deflected as the duelists shifted weight from foot to foot.

Suddenly, a dextrous twist and thrust by the man who had earlier lost his saber sent his opponent's saber flying from his hand and sliding across the courtyard. Before the defenseless man could turn and retrieve his lost weapon, the tip of a deadly-sharp blade was pressed up against him and pointed at his throat.

He looked down at it. Without a word, he stepped

back, pulled the mask from his face and bowed, conceding defeat. His conqueror tore off his mask and turned to the man on the balcony, a triumphant grin on his face.

"You saw it, *mon Capitaine*?"

Christian smiled slightly, nodded and left his position to join them below. When he reached them, he was greeted with a hard pat on the back. Stephan d'Ajasson, fired up by the workout, his silver eyes sparkling, gestured toward his fencing partner.

"This is the first time, *mon ami*, that he has lost his weapon to me! For this we must celebrate! Monsieur Gerrard has taught me well . . . perhaps *too* well, eh?" He winked at Gerrard who bowed and smiled.

In the salon he poured them each a goblet of wine and gestured for them to be seated.

"It is good to see you again, Christian," Stephan said as he took his seat. "It has been too long."

Christian reluctantly had to admit that he felt the same way. As usual, he could not be angry with the big Frenchman. Yes, it had been too long, but instead of saying so, Christian only nodded and asked: "How's the wound?"

Deciding to let his stubborn friend tell him what was troubling him in his own good time, Stephan replied, "It is well. I had a good doctor. And Monsieur Gerrard here has been of immeasurable help to me." Raising his goblet into the air, he directed it first to one man, then the other. "To you both I say, *merci*."

Several hours and many goblets of wine later, Stephan escorted Monsieur Gerrard to the door and returned to the salon.

"He is a good man," he said of the fencing master as he poured himself more wine. The moment he had anxiously awaited all evening, when he would find himself alone with the man who was supposed to be his best friend, yet whose hostility was painfully evident, had come.

"How did it go in England?" he asked.

Christian was not surprised by the question; he'd been expecting it. Taking a long swallow of wine he set the goblet down and told Stephan all about his return to England.

His story jolted the Frenchman. "Mon Dieu," he breathed. "Your brother is dead, you say? But who would do such a thing?"

Christian ran a hand quickly through his black hair. "I've a suspicion, but no proof. Only one man hated Trevor that much . . . my uncle."

Stephan frowned. "So that is why he sailed for Statia. . . ."

Christian was out of his seat in a flash, knocking over the goblet. Wine spilled across the table and dripped on the rug. "What? Statia? That's not possible. He's in Paris—traveling incognito."

Stephan was bewildered by the fierce reaction. "No," he said, shaking his head, "He sailed for Statia over a month ago. You did not know this?"

Christian's eyes clouded, then anger exploded inside him and the cobalt blue eyes burned with rage.

"The bastard!" The epithet tore savagely from his throat, startling Stephan. "He tricked me! The bloody bastard tricked me! By God, he'll pay for it!"

Of all possible reasons for his friend's fury that Stephan might have thought of, he never considered the explanation Christian gave him when he finally calmed down. Then Stephan, so rarely moved to explosive anger, had all he could do to keep his clenched fist at his side and not drive it into Christian Youngblood's jaw.

Not for a moment did Stephan think the terrible mistake that had delivered Juliette into the hands of her worst enemy was anything more than that. But it was one more example of the way Christian mistreated the girl. She was forever bearing the brunt of his arrogance and the heartache of his love. Turning away to hide his emotions, he crossed the room and pulled open the window. A blast of chill air swept in lashing his face.

Only when he felt sufficiently in control of himself did he close the window and turn back into the room.

Christian stood leaning over the table, as if gasping it for support. When he looked up at the Frenchman his face was pale, his eyes bright, he, too, was ready to discuss the situation calmly.

Stephan was pacing the floor. "All right," he said, "we will go to Statia. Franklin will not like it, but it is decided."

Christian wasn't sure he cared for Stephan's take-charge attitude. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight."

"The *Rebel* is ready?"

"She is waiting at Lorient. I had a good look at her the day I took Juliette—" He stopped abruptly, the air froze between them at the sound of her name. "As I said, *Rebel's* ready. I left orders with Willis to round up the crew."

"Then there is just one problem that I can see," Stephan said.

"I've taken care of everything," Christian insisted. "We'll be flying an English flag when we go into port."

"Ah, yes, but what happen when they board the ship?"

"I've thought of that too. You'll have to slip ashore somehow, because I doubt they'd take lightly to a Frenchman aboard, and I'll go ashore with them."

Stephan eyed him suspiciously. "And what makes you think they will be kinder to you? Have you thought of that?"

His eyes locked with Stephan's challengingly, Christian said, "I'll be going to Statia as the Duke of Amherst."

He expected an argument from the Frenchman and was surprised when it didn't come. Instead, Stephan drew in a deep breath and then let it out slowly through pursed lips. "It is a dangerous thing to do, but I can see no other way if we are to rescue Juliette." Then, looking deep into his friend's eyes, gray striking blue in

a clash that melted into affection, he said, "You have fought so long to deny your heritage, Christian. You realize that by doing this thing you can never go back to the old ways."

In a soft voice that bore no trace of anger, Christian replied, "This war will not last forever. When it is over, the old ways won't matter anymore. I've no wish to become an unemployed spy, my friend. Look at what *you* have to come back to when they have no further use for us." He waved his arms, indicating the magnificence of the room and, by implication the entire d'Ajasson estate. "I have half a dozen residences all over the world but not one of them is home. Who knows, my friend, maybe I've come full circle?"

But Stephan d'Ajasson was not convinced. No, the big Frenchman decided, if Christian had been fated to bear that title, he would have claimed it long ago. If he donned it now it was only for a green-eyed woman who meant more to him than he would admit.

Chapter 38

A simple muslin gown would have been Juliette's preference this evening. She had neither the wish nor the stomach to appear gay and charming. If she was once again masquerading as a flirtatious little tease, it was only to distract so many English minds from an obvious fact, that she was a Frenchwoman on a British-ruled island and nothing better than a prisoner of war. So, she had dressed carefully for the role she had to play.

She wore a violet silk gown that clung to her slim hips and slender thighs like a second skin, emphasizing the swells and curves of her body. The high-waisted bodice outlined the curve of her breasts barely covering them.

There were jewels at her ears and throat. More jewels sparkled in her hair which was piled loosely atop her head with just a few curls on her forehead and at her temples. As if her beauty alone did not call enough attention to her, the shimmering violet of the gown against the striking green emeralds Trevor had once said suited her so well produced such a striking combination that all eyes were drawn to her when she removed the satin cloak from her shoulders and handed it to the butler.

Good, Juliette thought triumphantly; she had achieved just the effect she wanted. Glancing about, she saw the familiar faces of many people she had entertained at her own parties. Women did not seem to have much of a part in this war. For the most part, the

guests present were men: admirals, captains, members of the British Government who had been sent to Statia to investigate Sir Rodney, even the former Dutch leaders of the island who were officially prisoners of war but who, like Juliette, were unofficial guests at the soirees in Statia's lower town.

Juliette herself was a frequent guest at these parties, usually in the company of some gentleman who proved to be a scoundrel in the carriage on the way home. Sometimes, like tonight, she arrived unescorted, flaunting convention.

She threaded her way through the crowd, smiling demurely to those who came up to greet her, inclining her head and lowering her lashes properly whenever one of them kissed her hand, lips lingering too long. An arm would reach out as she passed to encircle her slender waist, and pulling her aside, some dashing English commander or some handsome Dutch official would whisper a risque remark in her ear. She would blush and suppress a giggle while in her heart she felt nothing but revulsion.

"Ah, so there you are," a voice sang out behind her, and turning, Juliette watched her host, Silas Armitage, swish up to her, arms and lips extended.

He was an annoying little man who always had one eye on the mirror, who clung much too tightly to both men and women, and who was always touching and kissing as though the gestures somehow made him more important. Actually, he was nothing more than a professional party giver. Though his chosen profession paid him no wages, he managed to live quite comfortably through the pretty women who brightened up his affairs. Most were local girls, but some had been brought all the way from England at Silas' own expense, an investment that increased two-fold, three-fold and more.

Offering him her cheek, Juliette also extended her hand, suppressing a shudder when he slipped his limp hand into hers.

"My dear, you look absolutely *divine* this evening," he gushed. "That gown is ravishing! Really, violet is *such* a lovely color on you."

He steered her among the guests, an appropriate smile affixed to his face, as he greeted new arrivals. He managed, at the same time, to conduct a private conversation with Juliette under his breath.

"I shan't beat about the bush." He smiled for the benefit of the others, reserving the bitchy tone solely for her. "It has occurred to me that you have taken a rather large interest in France lately. Planning on going back home, are you?"

Juliette looked up at him and smiled prettily. "Why, Silas, what do you mean?"

"You would do well not to toy with me as shamefully as you do with others," he told her, wrapping his fingers tightly around her hand. Confident that he had her attention, he said, "How badly do you wish to get back to France?"

For some reason, not knowing whether this miserable creature could be trusted, Juliette heard herself confessing, "I will do anything!"

"Good," he said patting her hand. "That is just what you will have to do. I have it all arranged."

The conversation was taking a turn Juliette did not like. Cocking her head, green eyes narrowed suspiciously, she asked, "What exactly, has been arranged?"

Silas smiled sweetly. "Can you be so naive? I think not. The same thing I arrange for other gentlemen on occasion I have arranged for a very special guest who arrived just yesterday. He has asked specifically for the most beautiful woman on the island, the one with the eyes like emeralds, he said."

Those jewel-green eyes glittered speculatively. Was Silas offering to set her up with someone who could get her off the island? The thought was partly exciting, partly terrifying. For if she agreed, just what would be required of her? This would not be play-acting; the curtain would be going up on a very real performance.

She tried to appear nonchalant at the thought of

offering herself to some strange man in exchange for her freedom. At this point she was prepared to do whatever she had to do to get back to France. "I just hope this gentleman is wealthy," she said, forcing herself to laugh suggestively. "You know how expensive my tastes are."

Silas Armitage was thinking what a fortune he could make with this woman as his partner. After tonight, he would see what he could do to tempt her to use what God had given her to turn a neat profit. But first he had to deliver her to the man who had already paid for her.

"Oh yes, my dear," he assured her. "He is a *very* wealthy man. Family wealth, the best kind, I always say. And what a glorious compliment for *you*, Juliette, to be chosen by the Duke of Amherst. . . ."

Juliette felt her hands go cold first, then her legs, as all the blood seemed to leave her body. The smile froze on her lips. All thought ceased as Silas led her through the crowd toward a tall, black-haired man standing with his back to them. And then he turned, facing them. Juliette sucked in her breath sharply as bright blue eyes met hers.

He was dressed for the part tonight in a black-velvet frockcoat trimmed with ebony braid, worn over a silken waistcoat embroidered with silver thread. Black breeches clung tightly to his well-muscled legs and disappeared into the tops of black, high-polished boots. Delicate lace ruffles cascaded down his chest from the stock tied round his neck, and matching ruffles showed at his coat cuffs. At his throat he wore a diamond and sapphire stickpin, the glitter of the diamonds contrasting dramatically with his somber black elegance, the blue of the sapphires matching the color of his eyes.

Tonight those devilish good looks had been transformed into a brutal handsomeness that was awesome. The velvety smooth way he moved, the arrogance of his stare, the air of contempt for everyone but himself, all served as proof of his nobility—a nobility he seemed to Juliette to be flaunting at her in particular.

She barely heard Silas's chatter as he guided her

closer to him. "Can you imagine," he was saying, in a gossipy undertone, "he stepped in from out of nowhere to claim his title. As I understand it, he had been living abroad for years when he heard of his brother's death. Just couldn't let all that wealth go by untouched, I suppose. I must say, he lost little time putting a good share of it to use. You would not *believe* what he has paid for you."

Juliette did not know where she found the courage to face him, much less the strength to endure Silas' prolonged obsequious introduction. But then there was that way he looked at her, as though with a single glance he could reinforce his claim on her, so when they were no longer plagued by Silas's company, her polite reserve turned to rage.

"You are as disgusting as he is! How dare you pay money for me!"

"And why not?" Christian Youngblood shot back. "It appears that half the island has already paid for the privilege of having you. Let's just say I wanted to see what all the fuss was about." He cast a slow appraising look over her. "So this is the highest-priced courtesan on Statia."

Her mouth dropped open, but before she could voice her indignation, the music began and he was leading her onto the dance floor.

"The Amherst jewels?" Christian asked mockingly, touching the emerald necklace as he drew her unwillingly body into the circle of his arms.

For the benefit of whoever was watching, Juliette smiled up at him sweetly. "That's right. Why shouldn't I wear them? Lord Alfred has graciously allowed me to keep those I fancied. Kind of him, don't you agree?"

Christian's arm tightened painfully around her small waist and she tried not to wince at the pressure. "What kind of games are you playing?" he demanded.

"None," she said. "I signed it over to him. He owns it all."

"You *what*?" Christian's voice rose sharply in spite of an obvious effort to keep it under control.

"I said . . ."

"Shut up, damn it, I heard you." Surprisingly, he seemed not so much angry at the news as annoyed. "What a little ninny you are. How could you give away what you don't even own?"

She would never have confessed it to him, but the same thought had crossed her mind. Instead, she peered up defiantly at him through thick black lashes and replied in a soft, deceiving purr: "Whoever would have thought you would have the nerve to reveal who you really are? And as long as you were not around, it was easy to give away what the world thinks is mine."

"But I am around," he said, crushing her in his arms. "How do you think His Lordship will react to that news? That piece of paper you signed is worthless, my love. When Uncle Freddy finds that out, he will no doubt look around for one other, more desperate, way to get his hands on all that money."

Recalling Lord Alfred's dark threats, Juliette's heart sank. Now he would have her turned over to the British as a French spy. After she had done her best to convince everyone on Statia that she was just what Christian thought her, a courtesan, who on earth would ever believe her now if she told the truth? At this point, Juliette was no longer certain even she knew what the truth was.

"Where is my Uncle this evening?" Christian asked, pulling her attention back to him.

"He stayed home complaining of stiffness in his legs."

"And how are you getting back?" he demanded.

"What business is it of yours?" she said haughtily.

"He will send a carriage for me. And now, if you don't mind—?"

Pushing hard against his chest, she extricated herself from his captive embrace and, spinning away disappeared into the crowd.

The evening passed torturously for Juliette. Everywhere she went she was hounded by Christian Youngblood's blue eyes, reminding her of their fateful first

meeting that night at Versailles. It was actually a relief when she spotted Silas making his way toward her.

"Juliette, my lovely child, be an absolute dear, would you, and run upstairs to fetch my asthma salts?"

"Really, Silas," she said, in no mood for his whining, "you are perfectly capable of fetching them yourself. Do I look like the maid?"

He pouted like a spoiled child. "Oh please. Admiral Rodney has just arrived and I must greet him. Do this for me, Juliette, please?"

"Oh, well, all right, where are they?" At least, she thought, it would take her out of Captain Youngblood's sight for awhile.

"In my bedroom at the end of the hall, on the dresser. Oh I shan't forget you for this, really I shan't."

Disengaging herself from him Juliette went upstairs, annoyed at having to run Silas' errands but pleased to get away from the party. She found his room without difficulty by simply following the delicate feminine fragrance that was his trademark. On his dresser were an assortment of crystal vials filled with various essences, a frilly lace hanky, and a woman's undergarment. The latter confirmed Juliette's suspicions about the man. Wrinkling her nose in revulsion, she reached for the small bottle of asthma salts and turned to leave.

The sight of the tall figure leaning nonchalantly against the doorjamb paralyzed her and the bottle fell from her hand onto the carpet.

Christian Youngblood walked into the room and kicked the door shut behind him. "As Silas said," he told her mockingly, "I've already paid in advance."

Juliette recoiled from him, shaking her head. "Don't touch me! I won't have your dirty hands all over me."

"Why not?" he taunted her. "Every other pair of hands on Statia seem to have been all over you. I must say, you lost no time making a whore of yourself. Tonight I intend to find out just how much you have learned."

She took a step backward, disgust showing in her eyes. "It would be just like you to believe those ugly

rumors. After all, you're nothing but a liar yourself—a liar and a murderer."

Murder was one thing Christian Youngblood could never deny. In his exploits he had sent more than ships to the bottom of the sea, and his sword had found its way through many a man's heart. But when had he ever lied to her?

He took a menacing step toward her and she shrank back from the threat she saw in his eyes. "I wouldn't call anyone names, if I were you. You seem to have acquired a few yourself that would make any real lady blush."

"I told you it's all rumor," she countered. "Ugly rumors spread by idle minds. But I would not expect a man like you to understand that, and frankly, I don't care if you do or not. In my heart I know what is true and what is false, and I know who the real betrayers are."

"And I suppose I have the illustrious honor of being one of them?" he asked.

"You . . . Your Grace . . . are at the top of the list."

He feigned humility. "Truly an honor. And to what do I owe it, may I ask?"

"There are so many counts in your favor," came the sarcastic reply, "not the least of which is your sending me to this place. 'It is the only safe place for you Juliette. You must go there Juliette. I will follow you in a month Juliette.'"

She whipped her head back and began to laugh. Color rose in her cheeks giving them a rosy glow. Her chest heaved with suppressed anger; small, round breasts pushing tightly against the thin fabric of the gown that exposed much too much of her. She looked like a whore, he decided, his eyes traveling over her. He was aroused by her wonderful supple body wrapped in that frivolous party dress that left so little to a man's imagination. She was so beautiful when she was fired up like this. But the hard, cutting edge of her voice made him feel a fool for wanting her as much as he did.

Abruptly she stopped laughing. Aiming a scornful

look at him, she said, "To think I actually believed you. I should have known that you were sending me into a trap. Every encounter I ever had with you should have been proof that you were a man not to be trusted." She turned away from him in disgust.

His voice was harsh. "You don't think . . . Good God . . . you don't think I sent you here knowing it was a trap, do-you? Dear God, Juliette, what kind of monster do you think I am?" The shock in his eyes was genuine, but Juliette was not looking at him to see it. Her head averted, her voice cold, detached, she said, "I think you are the worst kind of monster."

Confused and angry at her response, Christian turned away. Did she really think he had purposely sent her to Statia knowing it was in British hands? Where the deuce could she have picked up that idea? Suddenly, his mind alighted on the only possible answer.

"Don't you see what he is doing?" he said, coming up to her swinging her around by the arm. "He is filling your mind with lies while he tries to lure me into an inescapable position. And you, by believing him, have abetted him."

"Do not speak to me of lies, Christian Youngblood!" Juliette stormed wrenching her arm from his grasp. "His lies at least are straight-forward, leaving no doubt. You withhold the truth. I, for one, can see no difference."

"You silly little fool," he said and pulling her to him he brought his mouth down on hers in a kiss that silenced her harsh words.

Outraged by the action, Juliette tried to push him away, but her small clenched fists against his big chest were useless. The force of his kiss had bent her over backward in his arms so that she lost her balance and had to grasp his neck to keep from falling.

Christian pulled his lips from hers and buried them into the mass of dark hair at her neck. Holding her with one arm wound around her waist, he reached with his free hand and ripped her gown from her body.

She continued to fight him, screaming curses at him

until he spun her around, hoisted her over his shoulder and carried her, kicking, to the bed where he flung her down unceremoniously. With one hand over her mouth, he held her down and silent while she squirmed furiously, biting his fingers and flailing at him with sharp fingernails.

Brutally he grabbed a thrashing arm and twisted it behind her back, bringing a stab of pain to her shoulder and a muffled scream from her throat.

At last she lay still, exhausted from her struggles, sobbing in frustration. He took her then, savagely, savagely as the first time aboard the *Rebel* when he had believed she was an experienced little tease used to harsh lovemaking. But she had been a virgin then, and the discovery of it had stirred in him a wild desire for this woman that had never waned. Whenever he had her, he wanted her again and again until nothing else mattered—not how much she hated him, nor how many other men had had her—nothing except having her in his arms, naked and helpless, her body fevered from making love and her flesh quivering from his kisses as now.

When he was through, he rolled off of her but threw a leg over her naked body to keep her in place. He lay on his side, propped up on an elbow, studying her. "You even make love like a whore," he said.

That brought an instant response from Juliette. Furious she struggled to escape from the bed. "You brute!" she cried when she was unable to throw him off.

"Be still." He came down over her again and pinned her arms above her head, "It was meant as a compliment."

Green eyes smoldered. "I do not need your compliments. If I were truly what you think I am, don't you think I would have all the compliments I could possibly want?"

His fingers tightened on her fragile wrists. All pretense to bitchiness dropped from her abruptly. "Oh! You are detestable! What use would it be to try to

convince you that I am not what you think I am? A man like you would never believe the truth!" She twisted her head so she would not have to look into those eyes, but grasping her chin he forced her to face him.

"And what would it take to convince you that I didn't lie to you, didn't betray you? I told you I didn't know that Statia was in British hands or anything about my uncle being here. But no, you'd rather believe him, a man who will say and do anything to get what he wants!"

Now it was he who turned away. He rose from the bed and walked, naked to the window to stand silhouetted against the glow of the moon. Hard-muscled legs braced slightly apart, arms folded across his chest, back muscles tense, he gazed out at the night. "There's a storm coming," he said, more to himself than to her. "It should be here in a couple of hours."

Juliette used his distraction to gather her own thoughts and attempt to make some sense out of the situation. Oh, if only her heart and her mind were not at such odds with each other over this man. Her confused mind told her not to trust him; her heart, broken so many times by his lies, had never stopped loving him.

Christian spoke from the shadows. His voice polite, indifferent. "You want to return to France I am told. Very well, it can be arranged. But in return for that, I will expect certain things from you."

She should have known that he would bargain with her. It must run in the family, she thought bitterly rising from the bed. "I can hardly wait to find out what that may be."

He replied flatly, "You will become my mistress."

Christian had expected her to react violently to the suggestion. Instead, as unpredictable as ever, she flashed him a wicked smile and running a hand up under her hair, swept it off her shoulders in a seductive display. "But of course I will," she said, her voice teasing. "After all, a high-priced courtesan deserves what only a duke's money can buy. Besides, I've

become bored with those fools. At least you manage to exhibit a bit of imagination in your lovemaking."

Christian's blue stare cut into her, nearly shattering her self-control, but she didn't care. Let him think the worst! Why not? He already did!

She sauntered by slowly, deliberately and his eyes moved with her. So what if she was a whore, he told himself. Somehow he preferred to believe that she had sold herself to a man—many men—rather than given herself willingly.

Juliette would never have understood that. Another man might have; one who was as deeply under her spell as he was.

Names came to his mind to torture him with jabs of irrational jealousy. Ramir Tabori . . . Nevsehir . . . Trevor and . . . Stephan, the only one of the others who had the means to win and keep her.

Snatching angrily at his clothes, Christian dressed quickly, than strode to the wardrobe and pulled out a gown. "You can wear this," he said gruffly, tossing it at her. "If anyone asks you where you got it, tell them I bought it for you. I wouldn't want any of these fine gentleman thinking I don't treat my mistresses well."

Juliette would much rather have slipped back into her own violet gown, but since it lay in shreds on the floor, she reluctantly accepted the green satin sheath. Surely it was just a coincidence that the color matched her eyes so well. He must have picked it up somewhere in his travels as a part of his plunder. When the thin shoulder straps were in place, she turned her back to him to allow him to hook it up.

When every tiny satin-covered button was slipped into its loop, he spun her around to inspect the results. He knew he'd chosen well. He had searched several Parisian shops for just the right color. It was the kind of dress that only she could wear.

Studying herself in the mirror and secretly pleased with what she saw, Juliette said, "I was at the dock yesterday and I did not see your ship there."

Christian watched her admire herself, amused.

"After I came ashore I publicly ordered the crew to take the *Rebel* over to St. Kitts. The naval commanders here need room in the harbor to accomodate the unsuspecting vessels that are falling into their trap and I was only too happy to oblige them. If the crew followed my private orders, however, the *Rebel* is anchored in a small cove on the north side of the island. Stephan is guarding her."

The name drew Juliette's attention away from her pretty new dress. "Stephan is here? On Statia? I don't believe it!"

Christian was annoyed at her obvious enthusiasm.

"That pleases you?" he asked stiffly.

She flashed him a rebellious look. "Yes, it does. When he was in Paris, I—"

"In Paris?"

"Yes, he was at my Aunt's, and . . ."

"At your Aunt's?"

"Yes, but I wasn't—"

"Never mind, damn it!" he snarled. "I don't require a detailed description of your private affairs. Just remember our arrangement, if you want to get off this island."

Juliette bore up under his irrational anger. "I am a prisoner of war," she pointed out to him matter-of-factly. "Can you really be so naive as to think that they will allow me to leave this island with you just beacuse I am your mistress?"

"Perhaps not," came the terse reply that should have warned her of something yet to come, "but they will let you off as my wife."

She whirled to face him then, shocked and outraged. "You really are insane! Do you think I have any wish to marry you?"

He eyed her dispassionately. "It appears, my love, that I am forever running to your rescue. I have risked a great deal this time, and if you wish to get out of here, it will be done in whatever way I see fit. I don't think I need remind you of the alternative. The moment I leave this island you will belong to whichever of those

fools claims you first, and with Silas Armitage in control, I would expect a rather steady stream afterward."

Oh! How she hated that mocking voice, almost as much as she detested his habit of standing with his feet apart, thumbs hooked in his belt, head cocked arrogantly. Dear God, was it possible to love a man so madly and hate him so at the same time?

"Come along," he said, opening the door and stepping aside for her to pass through, "and do try to suppress your happiness."

When they rejoined the party, Juliette managed to slip away from him and lose herself in the crowd. Christian let her go; he knew where to find her.

As he moved about the room he received some sly winks and knowing smiles from the other guests. He spotted his host swishing through the crowd, that perpetual simper affixed to his face. Beckoning to him, Christian drew him aside. "Join me on the terrace. I wish to speak to you about the lady."

Silas's heart leaped into his throat. Had that impossible woman offended the Duke somehow? Knowing her acid tongue, most likely she had.

Once out on the terrace, Silas grasped Christian's black velvet sleeve anxiously. "She was not to your liking, your Grace?" Visions of all that money slipping away made him shudder.

The look he received prompted him to withdraw his hand immediately.

Smoothing the sleeve and assuming the aloof, indolent manner expected of a British nobleman, Christian replied, "On the contrary, she was much to my liking . . . I would like you to arrange accommodations for her here."

Silas' eyes bulged. "Here, Your Grace? In my home?"

"Yes. It would facilitate matters for me greatly, and I can assure you it will be well worth your while."

Silas' initial objection changed to interest. "What did Your Grace have in mind?"

"I will pay you generously for her board and whatever else she requires while she is a guest in your home. You shall report to me each offer that is made for her. In return for your denying each one, I shall pay double whatever the offer was."

He knew it was an attractive bargain and could see Silas mentally adding up the profits. "You understand," Christian added, "that I do not wish to share this acquisition with anyone."

Smiling back knowingly, Silas extended a limp hand to seal the bargain.

Christian grasped the soft milk-white hand in his strong tanned one and applied increasing pressure until Silas looked about to burst into tears. Without a parting word, Christian left him standing on the terrace, soothing his wounded hand, and returned to the party. He felt confident that in sealing this bargain he had provided Juliette with a relatively safe place where his uncle could not easily get at her. At the same time he had assured himself that no other man would have her.

Chapter 39

Stephan d'Ajasson felt the first drops of rain on his head and frowned. He knew there was going to be a storm, and he had hoped to reach shelter before it began. These Caribbean storms had a way of whipping up out of a perfectly clear sky to rip through the islands with fierce winds and deluges of water. More rain drops struck his cheek. Evading the British troops that swarmed all over Statia was difficult enough without the disadvantage of a tropical storm.

Stephan likened such a storm to a woman, a wild and completely unpredictable woman, soft and seductive at first like the drops of rain that soothed his face, then suddenly erratic and unmanageable. Smiling to himself as he rode at a steady canter down the dark road, he thought: Yes, just like a woman . . . like one woman in particular who had the unnerving ability to pick up his heart in her hand and toss it around with as little care and as much devastation as the fiercest tempest.

The wind picked up, whistling through the gigantic fans of the palms. Looking up, Stephan saw that the moon was no longer visible. Instead, clouds darkened the midnight-blue sky. Like an ominous stranger cloaked in black the storm approached until Stephan could feel its warm breath on the back of his neck.

He wished now that he hadn't left his coat behind, but at the time who would have thought he would have more than the British to contend with? At least he had accomplished what he set out to do: he had gotten a firsthand look at the captured facilities, particularly the

warehouses, to see what the British toll amounted to. There was really nothing more to do but head for the *Rebel*. He would have to be careful, though. There were miles of road ahead before he reached the north side of the island and an awful lot of British muskets in between.

Stephan had calculated that it would take him two days of steady riding to reach the cove where the *Rebel* lay at anchor, but that was before the storm. If that continued to build he would never reach the cove in that time, which meant that he and Christian would not meet at the ship in the seven days they had arranged when they parted company, because Stephan now had just two days left to get there.

The rain was falling harder now, slashing down sideways with sudden fury. In a matter of minutes, Stephan could see only a few feet ahead and he was soaked through to his skin. Blonde hair plastered in wet tangles against his face, he rode on in almost total darkness, the rain striking sharply against his face. No, at this rate he would certainly never make it to the cove in time.

There was one chance of his keeping his rendezvous with Christian. It lay ahead in the form of a tropical rainforest. If he cut right through it instead of circling around as he had planned, he just might reach the *Rebel* in time. On the other hand, he just might get tangled up in the tropical maze of twisted vines and suffocating vegetation and never ride out of it alive.

Suddenly faced with a decision that he had no wish to make, Stephan was seized by irrational anger. While his captain was warm and dry and playing his part in elegant clothes and interesting company, Stephan's teeth were chattering from the cold, his clothes were dirty and wringing wet, and the only company he'd had that evening was the regiment of troops he had stumbled across that he'd "borrowed" his horse from.

Abruptly, he turned his horse's head back toward the harbor and the town . . . to one house in particular and the woman who was his reason for being there.

Laughter and music reached his ears first. Drawing nearer, he dismounted in the shadows and crept cautiously toward one of the lighted windows, the storm concealing his movements.

Just one look, he told himself, knowing it was a damned-fool crazy thing he was doing. But who would have thought that the first thing he would spy as he peered into the room would be Juliette, looking for all the world like a vision stepped out of one of his dreams?

Stephan smiled. Wasn't it just like her to be in the center of a circle of admiring men? Growing bolder at the mere sight of her, without thinking of the possible consequences, he reached up and quietly opened the window.

The sound of her teasing laughter suddenly stilled the tumult of the storm in his ears. Oh how he wished he were the recipient of the flirtatious promise in those gorgeous green eyes! She was easily the most beautiful woman in the room, as she had been the first time he'd seen her at Versailles when she had put the most beautiful women in France to shame.

She had been dressed then, he fondly recalled, in a gown of pale ivory whose simple lines emphasized the promise of her budding body. But tonight, dressed in an emerald green gown that boggled his senses, the provocative innocence she had had then was gone, replaced by a dazzling sensuality that left no man in that room unaffected. She glowed, flawless cheeks reflecting a warm, rosy tint. She sparkled, flashing jewel-bright eyes at her admirers. Her coy giggles captured their hearts and her husky laughter filled them with desire. No one could have guessed that beneath the gaiety, behind the teasing smiles lay a heart torn by indecision, a mind plagued by a million unanswered questions. No one, perhaps, except the man who knelt outside the window, observing it all.

Something was wrong, Stephan sensed. But what? Why was Juliette trying so hard? Why was she making such an effort to seduce each and every one of them?

Quickly, Stephan glanced about the room, and then his gray eyes widened in understanding.

Christian Youngblood stood with his back to the window, but still Stephan knew him instantly, black curls falling casually over the velvet collar of his jacket, legs apart in that familiar stance of his. He, too, was surrounded by admirers. They were fawning all over the Duke as though a single glance from him would somehow make them immortal.

But Christian's pose too, was seen through by the man who watched outside in the pouring rain. Every now and then he saw blue eyes glance across the room to meet—and clash—with green.

Stephan shivered with cold and pushed his wet hair from his eyes. Ah, so those two have been arguing again, he thought. *Mon Dieu*, even at a time like this they must find something to argue about! What could it be now? Before he had a chance to consider it, he was forced to duck down as two figures approached the window. The blur of green that swept before his eyes just as he took cover told him who one of them was. He held his breath at the nearness of her and strained to hear what was being said.

Juliette had had a difficult time catching the butler's eye. Now at last, after pleading a headache and disengaging herself from all those lips that sought to kiss her hand one more time, she managed to signal the butler and draw him aside toward the window.

"I want you to inform me the moment my carriage arrives," she told him.

"Of course, madam," he responded politely.

"Monsieur Armitage seemes to be enjoying himself so much," she said, "there is no need to bother him about it. Just let me know and have my wrap ready for me."

She knew Silas would make a terrible fuss about her leaving, and the less attention called to her departure the better. She wanted to be gone without having to say goodnight to a certain pirate who seemed to be having a grand time playing the part of a duke. Juliette gritted

her teeth. She might be forced now, by desperate circumstances, to become his mistress, but she did not have to stand by and watch these simpering idiots fussing over him. She was leaving. If he wanted her, he knew where to find her!

She did not have to wait much longer, thank God. Minutes later the butler returned to inform her that her carriage had arrived. Slipping the cloak over her shoulders and tying it securely at her throat, Juliette glanced out into the rainy darkness and frowned. The howling of the wind was a fearsome wail and overhead the palms swayed violently in their own valiant effort to withstand the wrath of the storm. Pulling the hood of her cloak up over her head, Juliette bid the butler goodnight as he held the door open for her and hurried out to the waiting carriage. Once inside, with the door shut tight and the rain beating against it, she pulled the shade on the window and sat back to wait out the ride. It would take nearly an hour, an hour of loneliness with nothing but painful memories to keep her company and only the battering rain to break the silence.

Why did it always have to be like this? she wondered. Just when she thought she had reached a point where she could begin picking up the pieces of her heart again, he walked back into her life, that—that devil who had set her world spinning from the moment they met. How was it possible to love and hate a man at the same time? Oh why couldn't it have been one of the others who had captured her heart so irrevocably? Juliette closed her eyes. Images sprang to mind . . . images of the other men in her life. The husband whose cold indifference masked a terrible secret . . . and made it impossible for him to love her . . . the desert prince who offered her an empire as proof of his love for her and who, in her heart, she knew she would always love in a very special way . . . the slave boy whose devotion to her cost him his life . . . the charming, irresistible Frenchman who surely would have won her heart if only she hadn't met Christian Youngblood.

Oh, Stephan, Juliette's heart cried, tears slipping

silently down her cheeks, why couldn't it have been you? Stephan d'Ajasson would never have given her heart a moment of misery, he was too thoughtful and sensitive. A man whose devotion she could have felt secure in and whose strong embrace would have protected her from harm. A man she could have spent the rest of her life with knowing she was loved and wanted.

Juliette felt she did love Stephan, that she had loved him ever since that night she had stood, confused and frightened, on the deck of the battle-torn *Rebel* and his gentle, soothing voice had made her feel not so terribly alone. Yes, she loved him, the big Frenchman with the boyish appeal had captured a part of her heart reserved for no other man, not even . . .

There it was again. Everywhere her mind turned, it always came back to him, and she found herself haunted by the image of his ruthlessly handsome face.

Once again she found herself torn between her emotions and her reason. Damn him, he divided her right down the middle leaving her confused and powerless to resist him.

She had no idea how long it was before she became aware that the carriage had stopped. Somewhere at the back of her mind, she recalled the force of the wind blowing the carriage from side to side, making harder and harder work for the team of four horses.

Leaning forward, she knocked rapidly on the front wall of the carriage to get the driver's attention. But when her knocks drew no response, she was suddenly filled with dread. Why wasn't he answering? There was only one way to find out. Pulling her cloak tighter about her, she reached over and opened the door.

A strong gust of wind wrenched the door from her hand and slapped it against the side of the carriage. All at once a torrent of rain splashed in showering her.

Juliette pulled the hood of her cloak over her head and peered out, squinting against the force of the storm. Calling out to the driver but still receiving no answer, she climbed down and immediately sank

ankle-deep into mud. She cried out and grasped for the carriage door to keep from falling into the thick brown slime in which the vehicle was embedded.

Clinging furiously to the side of the carriage, she pulled herself along, using most of her strength just wrenching her feet free of the mud that held her like quicksand. At last she reached the cab, but there was no sign of the driver. He had disappeared without a trace.

The sudden chill that ran down her spine then had nothing to do with the storm. Although Juliette had no way of knowing precisely what the danger was, she sensed it. She had to run! She could not stay here! There was something dark and deadly about all this—she just knew it!

The wind whipped her cloak about so wildly that its ties bit cruelly into her neck, nearly strangling her. She had no choice but to discard it. Frantically she worked at the ties. At last she was free. Flinging the cloak to the ground, she turned and ran as fast as she could away from the carriage and the sense of stalking doom.

She sobbed as she ran blindly into the terrifying darkness. Several times she stumbled and fell into the mud and scrambled up coughing and sputtering, the beautiful green gown Christian had given her stained with brown muck and clinging to her body. Mindless of it she ran, not knowing where she was running or why.

A wild cry escaped her as, glancing back over her shoulder, she spied a dark figure hurrying after her, illuminated by a flash of lightning. The startling sight gave her renewed strength to keep on running.

Breathless now, her heart nearly bursting with terror, she spotted up ahead a structure of some sort. Perhaps it was a house or an inn where she could summon help. Whatever dim hopes she had were extinguished when she reached it and found it was nothing but an old warehouse. Frantically she pounded on the big double doors. Her hopes revived when the doors swung open. She rushed in. Panting for breath,

she lowered the huge wooden latch into its slot, then somehow managed to roll a large barrel in front of the door, then another, and another. Only when she was safely barricaded inside the pitch-black warehouse did she collapse in a heap on the dirty, hay-strewn ground.

How long she remained there she had no idea. She must have fainted and when she finally became conscious again, she lay curled in a frightened ball, staring into the darkness, listening to a scurrying in the blackness all around her. Rats! A new and different kind of terror seized her. Her eyes, grown accustomed to the dark now, made out the little humped backs scuttling across the ground, dragging long, skinny tails behind them. She dared not move lest one of them take her unexpected presence as an offensive intrusion and incite all the others against her.

Shivering from the cold, her wet gown plastered to her body, shaking with fear of the two-legged enemy who stalked outside and the four-legged creatures surrounding her inside, Juliette thought she would go mad. She was tired, so tired, but she dared not close her eyes. As she lay there, fighting to stay awake, a sound from the far end of the warehouse drove a bolt of terror right through her.

Suddenly the rats seemed unimportant. Juliette rose on shaky legs, eyes squinting into the blackness, ears straining to detect the slightest sound.

And then she heard it . . . the unmistakable sound of footsteps.

Fear clutched at her. Whirling, she raced for the door and began pushing the barrels out of the way. Heavy sobs shook her body and growing panic made her hands tremble.

"No!" she screamed, when a frantic glance over her shoulder revealed a dark-cloaked figure emerging from the shadows. "No!"

Savagely she tore at the barrels, finding in herself a strength she did not know she possessed. One by one the heavy barrels were rolled away until at last only the

latch on the door barred her flight. She reached for it . . . and a scream ripped from her throat as a hand reached out and seized her firmly by the arm.

Immediately she began to fight her attacker, arms and legs thrashing out violently, teeth biting, as she was dragged away from the door and thrown to the ground. Blinded by panic, she sprang to her feet and charged at him, fists pounding his chest, fingernails scratching his face, vicious kicks aimed at his shins. In her ears, the roar of her terror-filled mind drowned out both the sound of the raging storm and her attacker's angry voice. A blow across her cheek that sent her spinning across the floor finally snapped her out of her crazed state. When her mind cleared, she gasped to see a familiar face glaring at her out of the darkness.

"What the hell is wrong with you, damn it?" It was more of a statement than a question, and he was in no mood for a reply. Gingerly he touched the place on his cheek where her fingernails had drawn blood.

Juliette's eyes, glassy and bright, gleamed back at him. The terror still raced through her body. She backed away from him, like an animal trapped in a dangerous corner.

"Don't come near me," she warned him. "I knew someone was chasing me, but I never thought—"

She stopped to gulp down a quick breath of air. Her breathing came rapidly and even in the darkness he could see her small hard nipples pushing against the water-soaked fabric of her gown. Her long dark hair fell in wild disarray over her shoulders and down her back; her once-beautiful gown was torn in several places, and one strap hung carelessly off her shoulder. Green eyes brimming with mistrust, she glared up at him.

"I never thought . . . *you* of all people! He was right about you! Oh God, Lord Alfred was right! He said you wanted it all for yourself so you could use it to . . . Oh God, kill me if you are going to, but be quick about it!"

Christian came up to her then and grabbed her sharply by the shoulders. "Stop it," he demanded, shaking her roughly. "Stop it! You're talking like a mad woman!"

With that Juliette began to laugh hysterically. "Mad am I? Then why did you follow me here?"

The accusing tone stung him. "You left before I could tell you about the arrangement I had made with Silas Armitage. I didn't want you going back to Lord Alfred, so I—"

She cut him off. "So you followed me here to kill me!"

His fingers bit cruelly into her arm and she winced at the pain. "Is that what you think? Answer me, damn it, is that what you think?"

"Yes!" she cried. "Why else would you have come to Statia? Why else would you have chased me here?"

Christian stared at her incredulously, then with a ruthless shove he released her. "You think I raced halfway around the world after you to kill you?" Shaking his head, he turned away. "Dear God! If I wanted the Amherst money I certainly wouldn't have to kill you for it. All I have to do is reach out and take it. It's mine, Goddamnit!"

"Not any more it isn't."

They both turned at the sound of the voice that came from the darkness behind them. Juliette blinked hard and Christian swore as Lord Alfred Clairborne stepped out of the shadows, a pistol in his hand.

He sauntered forward. Holding the pistol aimed at Christian, he spoke to Juliette.

"I cursed my luck when the blasted carriage got stuck in the mud," he said. "I had hoped, my dear, to run it off the road and dispose of you that way. But, no matter, for now I have you both exactly where I want you."

His contemptuous glance moved to Christian and turned into a sneer of loathing. "So it is yours, is it? How wrong you are, Nephew. It has never been yours.

What a fool you are to even think it." He gave a sigh of boredom. "Fortunately, after tonight you will no longer suffer from such delusions."

Christian took a menacing step forward. "Why you miserable—"

"I would not do that if I were you," Clairborne sharply cautioned him, brandishing the pistol. "Try to curb that appalling temper of yours."

Christian's mind worked frantically, seeking a way to put the man off guard so that he could make a lunge for that pistol. It was their only chance. If he could just get close enough to grab it, he could easily overpower Lord Alfred. But he knew if he took another step toward it, it would go off in his face.

Leveling a contemptuous look at his uncle, he said, "I can see your reason for killing me, but why Juliette? She's already signed everything over to you. She's no threat to you now."

Lord Alfred cast a cynical look at Juliette who remained speechless, face blanched with fear. "She has been nothing but trouble to me since the day she arrived at Amherst," he said. "I always thought she was far too headstrong to be a duchess anyway. Funny, you know, that was the very thing I told Edmund when he married your mother, but the fool would not listen to me. They were so terribly unsuited. Why, she was nothing but an actress, and everyone knows *they* are not much better than tramps."

As he spoke, he noted with satisfaction the way the muscles stood out in Christian's neck and his fists clenched helplessly at his sides.

"Ah, yes," Clairborne went on slowly, deliberately, "I was quite lucky that day to convince Marie to go riding with me. Under ordinary circumstances she would have refused—we did not get on at all well. But I hinted at the possibility of obtaining a part for her in a new play being produced by an acquaintance of mine. The silly little fool jumped at my invitation. You must understand, Christian, that it never was my intention to do anything more than talk to her and offer her an

attractive inducement to leave Amherst. But being as hot-headed as you are, she flew into a rage. We had a rather ugly argument and suddenly I was left really with no alternative. Fortunately, Marie had been so depressed that it was easy enough to convince everyone that it was suicide, and I—"

Christian would hear no more. Blinded by a storm of rage and hatred, he leaped forward, fingers outstretched, aimed for Clairborne's throat.

Juliette shut her eyes tightly and screamed. The sound was obliterated by the crack of the pistol. She thought she would faint, but by sheer strength of will she remained on her feet. Opening her eyes slowly, she steeled herself for the awful sight of Christian lying face down on the ground. What she saw instead staggered her.

Christian was still standing, breathing hard, eyes focused with glaring intensity on the figure sprawled at his feet. Lord Alfred lay there, head twisted to one side, eyes staring fixedly. The pistol was still clutched in his hand, the muzzle still smoking. A dark stain was seeping slowly through a jagged tear in the back of his coat.

Shakily, Juliette looked beyond Lord Clairborne's body to the glint of a saber that shone out of the dark. Her stunned gaze followed the saber upward to the hand that grasped it firmly, upward along the arm and across the broad chest and, finally, to the face of a man she recognized instantly. With a cry, she tore loose from the spot fear had frozen her to and raced to him.

"Stephan!" she cried, throwing herself into his arms and sobbing against his chest.

Wrapping his free arm about her slender body, he pulled her close and spoke soothingly to her in French until he felt her sobs beginning to subside.

Taking his eyes away from the body on the ground, Christian Youngblood turned and came to where they stood. His face was pale and his eyes bright. The little scene between Juliette and Stephan had affected him more than he cared to admit.

"I'm not even going to ask what you're doing here," he told Stephan, "but I'm certainly glad to see you! I didn't think we were going to survive this one." Reaching out he touched Juliette on the shoulder. "Are you all right?"

She trembled in Stephan's arms and barely managed to nod her head.

Directing his attention to Stephan again, Christian asked, "You heard everything?"

Stephan nodded solemnly and looked down disdainfully at his victim. "*Passer au fil de l'épée*," he muttered. Then, glancing back up at Christian, he repeated it in English, "Put to the sword, and even that was too good for him."

Christian was inclined to agree. "We've got to get out of here," he said brusquely, as always able to assume an impersonal attitude in the face of the most dire circumstances. Stephan wasn't sure if he admired or detested him for it.

Kneeling beside his uncle's body, Christian removed the pistol from the dead hand. "At least we're all together," he said, rising and tucking the pistol into his belt. "Do you have a horse with you?" he asked Stephan.

"*Oui*, but only one."

"That's all right. We'll go back to the carriage and unhitch two of those. We can't take a chance on waiting for this storm to end, though. We'll have to go back now." He glanced apologetically at Juliette. "I'd say wait here for us to return with the horses, but it's too dangerous. Chances are this area is crawling with redcoats, so we'll have to stick together. All right, let's go."

Stephan moved up beside him, but Juliette held back.

Her eyes drifted to Lord Alfred. "You're not going to . . . to leave him *here* are you?"

His response was an angry outburst. "Do you think he had an elaborate burial planned for *us*?" Grasp-

ing her firmly by the wrist, he yanked her along behind him. "Don't turn weak on me now Juliette," he ordered roughly. "As I see it, the worst is far from over. We still have miles of island to cross and nothing but trouble in our path no matter which way we go."

Chapter 40

The trouble Christian Youngblood anticipated was of the human variety, but except for a couple of close brushes with British troops—once nearly stumbling headfirst into a camp of redcoats—they managed to elude the enemy by trusting partly to instinct, partly to cunning, and mostly to luck.

With the reins of Juliette's horse clutched firmly in Christian's hand, the three of them rode on into the night, using the cover of the storm to zigzag a grueling path northward. After what seemed like endless hours of riding, when the storm had finally eased to a steady downpour, they pulled up sharply at the edge of the rain forest whose dark, forbidding interior would provide them with the only bit of safety in their dangerous flight.

Dismounting, Christian strode to Juliette's horse and, reaching up, unceremoniously yanked her to the ground. Over his shoulder he gave Stephan a look that the Frenchman read plainly: here at last was the forest Stephan had dreaded to enter, the one they told stories about, the one that swallowed men whole and gulped them down into the pit of its belly, never to be seen again.

Leaving the horses behind, they entered on foot. From here on they would need more than luck on their side. The thick overhang of gnarled branches and vines provided an umbrella of sorts. Surprisingly, little rain found its way through to the ground. Nevertheless, the

air was heavy with moisture, the hot, stifling kind that left a clammy residue on the skin and invaded the lungs making breathing a laborious task.

On and on they pressed, deeper into the black depths of the forest until the dim light of civilization was no longer visible over their shoulders. Gasping for breath, her feet getting constantly tangled in clutching undergrowth, exhausted beyond belief, Juliette thought her heart would burst if she had to take one more step.

"Please," she begged, sobbing and gulping for air, "please, I can't go any further. Please ..."

But all she received in answer to her plea was a merciless tug on her arm. At last, stumbling along in numbing exhaustion, her legs gave out and she sank to the ground.

Cursing under his breath, unable to get her back up on her feet, Christian picked her up in his arms and carried her. The last thing she remembered before slipping into unconsciousness was looking up into those blue eyes that seemed to be the only trace of color radiating out of the black night.

When she opened her eyes again, it was daylight, and she was lying atop a soft bed of green fanned leaves. It was perhaps the overwhelming stillness that she noticed first, then the feel of the air, hot and sultry and stagnant. From somewhere in the distance a strange call rifled through the ceiling of vegetation and echoed through the jungle. A moment later it was answered by another call, then another and another until the entire forest seemed to come alive with a million unseen creatures.

Wearily Juliette sat up and rubbed her eyes. Struggling to her feet, she stood and gazed in speechless wonder at the terrifying, yet strangely enchanting, paradise. Now fully awake, she began to spot signs of life in this jungle Eden. Perched here and there high in the entwined branches were the most colorful birds she had ever seen. Every now and then one of the

incredible creatures would spread its wings and take to flight, soaring from tree to tree. Shafts of sunlight pierced the green gloom catching and reflecting brilliant colors like a prism. Everywhere Juliette looked were new and mysterious things she had never before seen in her life.

That first day's trek through the dense forest undergrowth, with Stephan hacking a path with the edge of his saber, Juliette had the feeling of being encapsulated in a giant bubble, a terrestrial world dominated by massive trees, where a single drop of water falling into a stagnant pool miles away could be heard with the same crystal clarity as the caw of a parrot directly overhead.

But if the forest seemed at first a wildly exotic and intriguing place, it soon began to reveal another side. The deeper they progressed into its interior, the harder the going became. It now required much more than a sweep of Stephan's powerful arm to cut a path through the thickening vegetation. Now it took hours with Stephan and Christian taking turns hacking through gnarled vine and root to advance a few yards.

The air was oppressive, so was the heat. The only pools of water they came across now were stagnant, perfect nurturing places for the hordes of mosquitos that would rise like a dark cloud and swarm over them, attacking without mercy until Juliette could barely find a patch on her skin that was not swollen from their bites.

Still they pressed on, treading carefully now through the forest. From the corners of their eyes they kept a sharp lookout for movement in the trees that signified more than the birds. There deadly snakes slipped noiselessly through the branches, some hanging lifeless like the vines, ready to strike out at anything passing by.

They said little as they went, saving their strength. They had gone now for two days without food or water, and Juliette found herself struggling hard just to keep

her sanity. She could hear the gnawing pains in her belly and feel the parched feeling at the back of her throat. There was simply no way she could keep up with the men.

It was Christian's turn to clear their path, but when he saw Juliette teetering and about to drop from exhaustion, he moved to hand the saber to Stephan. But this time the big Frenchman refused it. Stepping forward, he swept Juliette up into his arms.

"It is my turn now, you have carried her long enough. You make me feel as if I am not doing my part."

Christian frowned and scooped up the sword with a savage sweep of his hand. Tight-lipped, he followed after them angrily questioning whether to take the blasted incident as Stephan's way of doing him a favor, or Stephan's way of getting closer to Juliette. At this point, Christian's nerves were strung tight. He knew as well as Stephan did that if they did not make it out of this deadly maze soon, they never would. Since staying alive was, at the moment, of prime importance, he wisely made no comment.

In the days that followed, however, it grew harder and harder for him to look the other way when he observed Stephan paying attention to Juliette, or to pretend that he did not hear them conversing softly in French. Still, he said nothing.

On the afternoon of their fourth day trapped in the stranglehold of the jungle, they came upon an unexpected sight: a pool of clear, fresh water surrounded by lush forest growth.

Christian set to work clearing a patch of ground and spreading it with a mattress of soft reeds and leaves while Stephan went off to gather the tart blue-colored berries that grew in abundance which they had discovered were edible. After they had eaten and rested, Juliette got to her feet and announced she was going for a swim, a notion that brought a flat "No" from Christian.

"Why not?" She pouted. "It's been *days* since I've had a bath."

"Oh, Christian," Stephan put in, "let her go if she wants. What harm can there be in it? I looked at the water. It is safe."

Christian gave him a look that said plainly he thought it was none of his affair. Flipping over on his side, he gave in, grumbling, "I don't care what she does. I'm going to sleep."

Juliette shot a bitter look at his back, tossed Stephan a smile of thanks and ran off.

At the water's edge she stripped off the tattered garment she wore that once was a fabulous gown. She had torn off the bottom just above her knees when she discovered that the extra length just added to the difficulty of trekking through the undergrowth. When she finished bathing, she would see what she could do about washing some of those ugly stains out of it, she decided. She waded into the shallow pool, and the water slipped along her legs like playful fingers. Even at its deepest point, in the center, it scarcely reached her thighs, but Juliette didn't mind. Bending over, she began to wash the caked mud and grime from her body, starting with her legs and carefully working her way up.

When she emerged at last, dripping wet, her hair hanging in long damp tangles down her back, she felt—if not happy—then at least clean and, for the moment, revitalized.

She would need as much strength as possible to get through this she knew, for not only were there still unknown miles of rain forest to traverse, but the tension that was building between Christian and Stephan was making the going that much harder.

The journey was a strain on all of them, making them irritable with each other. Juliette knew it was only with great restraint that Stephan maintained his silence whenever Christian's nerves got the better of him and he criticized her too harshly, or ordered her about. The

friendship for whose sake Stephan suppressed his emotions was showing dangerous signs of strain. No longer did Stephan bother to hide his affection for her behind easy smiles and laughing eyes. Now it showed in the way those gray eyes continually sought hers and the way he contrived to be at her side. Inside he simmered with a longing for her that grew stronger each day until it was no longer possible for Juliette to deny it, or Christian to overlook it.

All in all it made for a tense situation that was compounded by the grim thought that they might never find their way out of this jungle alive.

Finished with her bath, Juliette picked up her torn dress from the ground and was about to carry it back to the water when a sound from behind spun her around. Her hand flew to her mouth to silence her gasp of surprise. Stephan was standing not ten feet away; the look in his eyes left little doubt as to what was on his mind.

My God, how long had he been standing there? Juliette wondered. Her body tensed as he took a step forward. Uncertain of what to do, all too aware of her naked body, she made a vain attempt to hide it behind the dress she was holding. He reached out, took the garment from her and dropped it to the ground. A scarlet blush flooded her cheeks. Although she could not bring herself to look him in the eye, desperately her heart pleaded with him not to do this.

She could sense him looking at her, heard his breath quicken, and she knew she must do something. If she remained there much longer, Christian would come looking for her, and what would happen if he discovered them like this? She shuddered to think of the confrontation that would result.

Raising her eyes at last to his, she said in a voice filled with anguish, "Stephan, please, go away."

Once before she had seen that tortured look on his face. It had been in Cornwall when they had met in the abandoned churchyard, and she had read too much

of his feelings in his eyes. His voice choked with emotion now as then he said, "You know I am in love with you."

Juliette lowered her eyes and said softly, "Yes, I know."

"And you?" The question, though gently asked, demanded a reply.

What could she say to him? Should she tell him how much she loved him? Would he understand why that would never be enough? Would telling him the name of the man she truly loved help matters, or only serve to hurt him more?

Gazing up at him, green eyes bright with tears and pleading for understanding, she said, "I do love you, Stephan, but I can never give you what you want."

A shadow of pain crossed his face. "I told you once, *chérie*, that I would wait until you were ready to give it to me. If I cannot have from you the love I want, then you can give me what else I want without being in love with me."

She had never known him to speak so boldly and it startled her. Suddenly, his bigness alarmed her; she was instantly aware of how totally at his mercy she was should he choose to exercise his strength.

She took a hesitant step back, but his grip on her arm tightened, holding her there. Slowly he pulled her to him until her naked breasts were pressed tightly against the front of his shirt.

"Please don't . . ." Juliette began, but his lips came down on hers with stinging force and his arms went around her like two steel bands, locking her firmly in his massive embrace. Crushed up against him so tightly she could feel the throbbing bulge in his trousers, she waited for him to sweep her up into his arms and carry her off into the underbrush. She could almost feel the torrid touch of his flesh against hers, almost imagine her legs parting wide to accomodate him, almost thrill to his penetration.

Perhaps it was the shock of realizing how much she

wanted him to do that that jolted Juliette out of her trance. Desperately she pulled her lips from his and pushed him away. Barely able to catch her breath from the force of his kiss, she moved away from him. Bending quickly she snatched up her dress. With his eyes steadily watching her, she managed to get the dress back on. When she tried to slip past him, he blocked her way.

"I love Christian!" Juliette burst out. "I love him!"

Stephan looked deep into her eyes then for a long tortured moment. At last he stepped aside, still breathing hard, his broad, muscular chest rising and falling heavily, a hint of color in his cheeks that came partly from desire, but mostly, she knew, from anger.

Unmoving, he watched her hurry back to their resting place. Only when she was back a respectable time did he follow her.

Juliette now had two brooding men on her hands, for after the incident at the pool Stephan d'Ajasson immersed himself in a dark depression.

As they resumed their trek, tempers flared easily over the least little thing, like who ate the most berries or who was falling behind. The tense situation came to a head the following day when Christian took particular offense at the way she spread out the leaves for their noon rest and laced into her viciously about it.

"Why do you treat her this way?" Stephan demanded, able to ignore it no longer. For answer he received a furious glare from those blue eyes. Grudgingly, Stephan let it pass . . . but only for the moment.

Late that afternoon, after days of struggling through the forest, they finally staggered out onto the beach. The unexpected sight was overwhelming and touched off the explosive wick.

In a moment of exhilaration, Juliette sprang ahead, running for the water. In one swift leap, Christian jumped out in front of her, blocking her way.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he demanded savagely. "That beach could be crawling with British

soldiers! Do you want to get us killed, for God's sake?"

"Christian!"

Stephan d'Ajasson had had enough. His fierce bellow snapped their heads around. "I will not allow you to speak to her that way!"

Christian strode up to him and stopped, hands on his hips, feet apart, head cocked to one side. "What business is it of yours?" he demanded.

Stephan's gray eyes glinted back at him like two steel flints. "She has done nothing to deserve it, and as a gentleman, it is my duty to protect her—even from you, *mon ami!*" A tight smile spread across his lips, but it did not reach his eyes.

Unmoved by the smile and unintimidated by the threatening tone behind it, Christian glowered at him. "And who protects her from *you*?"

Stephan raised an eyebrow and asked, "From me? She has no need to be protected from me. I would cause her no harm."

"Of course not," Christian said mockingly, "now that you've already seduced her."

The Frenchman stared at him in astonishment, but before he could react, Juliette stormed forward, her small fists clenched in anger at her sides.

"Is *that* what you think?" she shouted, green eyes slanted in fury.

Christian turned on her. "You stay out of it!" he ordered.

"But it's not true," she protested. "Nothing like that has ever happened between us!"

"I told you—!"

"What more do you want?" demanded Stephan. "She has said it herself. Why can you not believe it?"

"Because I heard otherwise from your own bloody lips!" was Christian's heated reply.

Stephan's gray eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What is that you say? *What* did you hear from me? I have never said such a thing. When did you hear it? Tell me!" This last was a command that Christian Youngblood was quite willing to obey.

"While you lay on my bunk after my hands removed that damned pistol ball from your chest!"

Stephan stared incredulously. "*Mon Dieu!* And you take for the truth the mumblings of a man crazy with fever?" He shook his blond head disbelievingly. "Remember the time the Tory cracked his pistol over your head and you were unconscious for hours? Did you not say later that you had strange dreams?" He needed no reply to his question. "If you can dream, why can not I?" he demanded. "Or would you deny a man his dreams, eh, *mon Capitaine?*"

Christian eyed him uncertainly. He had never known Stephan to lie. A rogue, a libertine, a cunning scoundrel he might be, but not a liar.

But his wrath was not so easy to dispel. "Tell me you don't love her then!" he countered.

Drawing in a deep breath, gray eyes never once wavering from blue, Stephan replied, "I cannot say that, for then I would be a liar. But you are a fool to think you are the only man who could love such a woman. I remind you there is one who would have given his throne to have her." That brought a sizzling look from Christian.

Stephan continued, undaunted. "I say this to you—I have never had more than a kiss from her and that much I had to take for myself. I admit it and I offer you no apologies for it. And if you do not believe it, that, *mon ami*, is your problem, not mine."

The change that came over Stephan now was startling. The boyish charm and engaging smile were gone, replaced by a look of hauteur. Although his shirt was soiled and torn and his boots were muddy, there was no mistaking the air of nobility. Drawing his frame up to its full towering height, he stood poised, as if daring Christian Youngblood to challenge him.

The challenge came in less than a heartbeat. Christian drew his fist back and landed a solid blow to Stephan's jaw, knocking the Frenchman to the ground with surprise as much as impact.

Juliette screamed and ran to him. "*Christian! No!*"

"Stay out of it! This is between Stephan and me!" he shouted, sweeping her aside with his arm.

Stephan staggered to his feet and lunged for Christian, catching him by the legs and toppling him to the sand. The two men came together, rolling over each other, fists swinging wildly.

Juliette danced around them, crying for them to stop, and nearly got pummelled by the flailing arms and legs in the process. Springing back out of the way, she glanced about frantically for something to throw at them, to distract them and keep them from killing each other, which they seemed intent on doing. She ran about the beach in circles, but found only a few colorful seashells. And then she saw it.

Less than a foot away from where they struggled lay Christian's pistol which had dropped from his belt when the scuffle began. Juliette grabbed for it, barely avoiding a wildly aimed blow that could have knocked her unconscious. In the next instant, an explosion echoed down the beach.

Both men ceased brawling instantly and turned in unison in the direction of the shot.

"What the hell!" stormed Christian when he saw Juliette standing there, the pistol in her hand. Forgetting Stephan, he jumped to his feet, strode up to her and yanked the pistol away.

Goddamnit!" he exclaimed. "Do you realize what you've done? Now the damned British will be breathing down our necks!"

Looking back at Stephan, he said, "We've got no time for this now! We've got to get out of here! Are you with me or not?"

The Frenchman gave him an indignant look as he brushed sand from his breeches. "I have never *not* been with you!"

For a long moment they glared at each other. Juliette bit her lip apprehensively, praying they would not go at each other again. But only someone who knew Christian Youngblood as well as Stephan did would have

recognized what the look held. He did not know how it was possible for a man to say so much of what he was feeling with his eyes, but he read the apology written there and the unspoken reaffirmation of a friendship that had been severely put to the test . . . and survived.

Chapter 41

They had not gone more than a hundred yards down the beach when the air was filled with the sound of musket fire. Christian's fear was realized as a dozen red-coated soldiers came into view, hurrying fast on foot behind them.

Juliette screamed and stumbled, only to be ruthlessly yanked to her feet and half-carried, half-dragged between Christian and Stephan, each of them grabbing an arm as they fled the enemy fire. Over the "pop, pop" of the muskets she could hear the frantic thumping of her blood in her temples. All of a sudden the threat of death was as real as it ever had been. Never had she felt it so keenly, not even within the suffocating stranglehold of the rain forest. A horrified glance over her shoulder showed the British troops gaining on them. She could even hear their lieutenant screaming orders at them as they charged. Soon it would all be over.

"Up ahead!" she heard Christian shout. "The cove!"

With a renewed burst of energy, the three surged forward. The cove lay just on the other side of a large sandy ridge. Would the *Rebel* be there? Even if she was, would there be a boat waiting for them on the beach? None of them dared ask the question out loud, fearing the answer.

But their desperate hopes were miraculously revived when they scrambled to the top of the ridge and saw the mighty sloop of war waiting at anchor, its sails furled but ready to come alive instantly on command. Lying

partly in the water, partly on shore, anchored to the beach with a rope tied to a stake, was the longboat the crew had left there for them if they ever arrived.

Juliette looked back over the ridge and cried out. The British were closing in!

With a final burst of energy, they half-ran, half-stumbled down the ridge to the boat. Christian swept Juliette up in his arms and dumped her into the boat while Stephan yanked the stake out of the sand. Shoulder to shoulder, with a mighty heave he and Christian shoved the longboat into the water. In seconds they were afloat. Scrambling aboard, Christian and Stephan took up the oars and began rowing frantically while the guns of the *Rebel* fired onto the beach to keep the British soldiers at a distance.

"Remind me to give First Mate Willis a big kiss for this," said Christian, grateful for the covering fire.

Stephan laughed. "I think he would rather have a barrel of whiskey."

They rowed furiously, moving gradually away from the threatening shore where the soldiers ran about in circles seeking to escape the *Rebel's* cannonfire.

Dazed and frightened, Juliette barely felt the jolt as the longboat brushed the hull of the *Rebel*. Minutes later, boosted from behind and seized from above, she found herself standing in the middle of the deck, but not for long. She was soon hustled off to the side where she would be out of the way.

Stephan disappeared below deck to the cannon while Christian strode the deck shouting orders to the crew. The change that had come over him the moment he set foot back aboard his ship was remarkable. Gone were the fear and uncertainty Juliette had seen in his eyes back in the rain forest. In their place was the old hard-set look of determination. He was in his element now, not fighting in some strange and hostile land, nor serving an English dukedom. This was where he belonged. This was where he truly came alive.

Men scrambled up the huge masts to ready the sails. In what seemed to Juliette like mere minutes, the *Rebel*

was luffing her way out of the cove, toward the sea. Once in unrestricted waters, with nothing but open sea before her, the mighty sloop of war spread her lofty sails to catch the wind and soon left the island of St. Eustatia well behind her.

The wind was up and they were making brisk time. Christian had them set a course north by northwest. Everyone seemed to have a specific function to carry out except Juliette, who stood by feeling useless.

When the *Rebel* was on course, steadily ploughing her way through the Caribbean, Christian managed a few minutes away from his duties to see to Juliette. He found her cowering like a kitten against a coil of rope, still in the tattered remnants of the satin gown, green eyes dull with exhaustion. He felt instantly sorry for her. How could he tell her that the worst might not be over? How could he tell her that at any time they might meet up with one, or more, of the British war ships cruising the Caribbean? Rodney's fleet was lurking somewhere in the area, and Christian knew a confrontation was very likely.

As it turned out, he did not have to tell her. The lookout perched in the crow's nest began shouting and waving his arms furiously. Everyone on deck, including Juliette looked upwards then toward where the crewman was pointing. Then they all saw it:

A massive vessel lay out to starboard blocking their path, its sails readied for attack, cannon peeking out of her gun ports.

"Frigate, thirty-eight!" yelled the lookout, alerting those on deck to the type of ship they faced and, more important, to the number of guns she carried. Christian Youngblood looked grim; the *Rebel* was dangerously out-gunned.

He turned to Juliette. "I want *you* below deck!" he ordered, the tone of his voice leaving little doubt that he expected to be obeyed. He stomped away, then shouting, "Raise the British flag! We'll move in closer!"

At once everything came alive with an electric excitement that overwhelmed even Juliette's fear and

made the danger of the moment the only thing that mattered. Dear God, she thought wildly, have I gone mad too? Instead of going below as ordered, she crawled under a pile of canvas.

"Batten down!" Christian shouted. Instantly, the command was obeyed. Hatches were secured by gratings and tarpaulins held in place by long narrow laths of wood nailed over their edges. Men scurried about the deck preparing the ship for battle.

Stephan appeared on deck just then; looking for Christian, he hurried over to him. "*Mon Capitaine*," he shouted, "the guns are ready!"

Christian was supervising the distribution of arms, the muskets, grenades, pistols, sabers, and the like. He turned to the Frenchman. "Good. Disengage the doors covering the gun ports but leave them closed," he ordered. "Have the guns loaded and ready. Tell your gun captains to aim well on the first shot, because it will be the only one to our advantage."

"We cannot take her," protested the Frenchman. "It is foolish to try. I say we get as close as we can and make a run for it past her. With our speed, if we can get by her, we can outrun her."

But Christian gave little consideration to Stephan's advice. He had already contemplated that course of action and rejected it. Their only chance now, he believed, was to get in as close as they could and hope that, in being the first to fire a broadside, the unexpectedness of the attack would give them the upper hand.

Reading the look of dogged determination in Christian's eyes, Stephan exclaimed, "No! She is too big for us!"

"When did that ever stop us?"

Stephan sighed and spread his arms wide, signifying his helplessness in the face of such logic. "You are right, and a d'Ajasson does not run from the enemy." With that, he pivoted on his heel and ran off.

Below deck in the dark depths of the *Rebel*, Stephan issued the order to unlatch the doors that were kept over the gun ports to keep out sea-spray and rain when

the ship was not engaged. The guns were mounted on carriages with small wheels; they could be run out the ports to fire, then run back inside for loading. Although they could be shifted slightly, left or right, and raised and lowered, there was no device with which to aim. The men who captained the guns had to aim as best they could, peering through the smoke and powder, while attempting to time their firings with the roll and pitch of the ship. Accuracy was not an outstanding feature of this type of gunnery, and Stephan knew the importance of firing those first shots.

Sailing under the ruse of the British flag, displaying no overt signs of hostility, the *Rebel* was permitted to approach the British frigate to within a yard's distance. At Youngblood's order, her gun ports were thrown open at the same time that the British colors were struck and a huge American flag hoisted high to replace them.

The first broadside was fired by all guns in unison on the starboard side of the *Rebel*, ripping savagely into the unsuspecting frigate. From then on the guns were loaded and fired as rapidly as the crew could sponge out the barrels, ram down the muzzles the cartridges of powder, insert the priming irons and light the touch-holds. Despite the inaccuracy of the aim, at such close range the shots provided the single determining aspect of the battle that now raged full force.

The English commander retaliated with a vengeance, and the frigate's guns took their toll. Christian Youngblood felt the tide of battle turning and slipping away from him. He knew that if it came down to matching the frigate broadside for broadside her massive gun-power would overwhelm his smaller sloop of war. Stephan, standing behind him and speaking over his shoulder, confirmed where their only hope lay.

"We must run her down, *mon Capitaine*."

Turning, Christian looked into the Frenchman's soot-smudged, sweat-stained face.

"If we do not, she will get away and bring the others."

Their eyes met in unspoken acknowledgement of the fate that was about to be sealed. Inhaling deeply, Christian replied, "You're right. If we don't get in there hand to hand, we're doomed. Go below and get every spare hand you can find. Leave only enough men down there to man the guns and tell them that as soon as we ram, they're to come topside and take up arms with the rest of us."

Stephan hurried off to carry out his orders while Christian resumed supervision of the distribution of arms.

Both men had forgotten Juliette and were unaware of her presence on deck. With the lull in the fighting giving her courage, she peeked out from under the canvas she'd scurried under when the battle began. The awful black smoke was beginning to clear and, squinting into it, she looked now on a grizzly sight.

Men lay everywhere, lifeless bodies strewn about like broken dolls, some mangled with shot. The shrieks and moans of dying men drew her from her hiding place and she stumbled helplessly among them, each moan and agonized wail wrenching at her heart, each broken body causing nausea to flood from her stomach into her throat. Bravely she swallowed it down. She went from man to man, helping those who were still alive in whatever way she could. She bandaged the wounded, tearing shirts from the dead for bandages, wiped the sweat and blood from the faces of the dying.

When Stephan reappeared on deck, he found her hunched over a fallen crewman, bandaging a leg that was badly torn by one of the splintering wooden cannonballs the British had such a fondness for. Reaching down, he raised her gently to her feet.

"He will lose the leg," he told her quietly, "and you should not be up here."

"Let me stay," she pleaded, searching his eyes for understanding. "Please, Stephan, I am needed here. Let me help in whatever way I can."

This was why he loved her so, and because he loved her, he could refuse her nothing. "Very well, *ma*

petite," he said, smiling at her. "But you will stay out of the way of *le Capitaine*, eh? He would be very angry to find you here."

Impulsively, Juliette flung her arms around his neck and kissed him, her lips lingering longer than they should have. With the kiss she was thanking him for being so understanding, but the lovesick Frenchman interpreted it differently. He strode off, a wide grin on his face and his heart pounding furiously.

The wind had died down depriving the *Rebel* of the speed she needed to ram the other ship and allow her crew to board. For now, there was nothing to do but wait. One tense hour stretched into two and two into three. Finally, with dusk approaching, the battle-scarred sails of the *Rebel* began to fill once again and she eased forward. She moved slowly at first, but as the wind picked up so did her speed. When the British commander next looked up from his maps and charts, his heart leaped to his throat to see the prow of the *Rebel* bearing down on them.

She hit the frigate with a jolt that knocked men out of the rigging where they'd taken up positions to fire their muskets. In minutes, the *Rebel's* grappling hooks were secured, clutching the British ship firmly to the sloop's bosom. It was then that Christian Youngblood gave the order to board.

Up over the frigate's side swarmed the crew of the *Rebel* muskets and pistols firing, sabers slashing and fists swinging. What had begun hours before as a naval gun battle between two enemy ships, suddenly turned into deadly hand-to-hand combat.

Men ran about wildly and it was no longer possible to tell to which crew they belonged. From her rigging, the *Rebel's* marines picked off the British seamen, who made a valiant attempt to fight back.

Juliette let out a shriek as a body fell from the rigging and crashed to the deck at her feet, a pile of shattered bones. There was nowhere to run to now, nowhere to hide. The fighting raged all about her, swallowing her

up in its deadly tumult. A shout from somewhere behind her caught her dazed attention. Through the smoke she spotted Christian Youngblood.

His handsome face was black with powder and streaked with sweat. His once-white shirt was bloody, slit opened nearly to the waist, its billowy sleeves torn. But the look on his face told Juliette he was oblivious to everything but the battle now. With saber in hand he fought off one attacker, then another, and another, displaying over and over again the skill that had earned him a reputation as a swordsman.

He seemed to find renewed determination with each enemy he struck down. Musket balls whipped by, grenades exploded in the air over his head, but he fought on, and laughed contemptuously as he lunged forward to dispatch another enemy.

He never saw the face of the man who put the bullet in him. All he knew was that the sword was suddenly snapped from him and an unbearably hot pain tore through his right shoulder. A quick glance confirmed his fears; already blood was seeping through his shirt.

Juliette screamed and ran to him, fighting her way through brawling bodies to reach him. The sight of her stunned him, drawing his attention away from his wound.

"What the hell are you doing up here? I told you—" A stab of pain stopped him short, and he staggered back a step.

"Lean on me!" Juliette demanded. Without waiting for him to comply, she slung his arm around her shoulders and hobbled away with him. He was breathing hard by the time she got him to a sheltered place, and all the color had drained out of his face. Tearing his shirt open she inspected the wound. The bullet had passed clear through his shoulder, thank God, but he had already lost a good deal of blood.

Juliette snatched at her dress and ripped a jagged strip from the hem. Wadding it up she applied it to the wound with a pressure that made him groan, and

followed it up with a second strip which she wound tightly about his shoulder to hold the compress in place. Feeling she had done all she could for him, she rose to leave and tend to the others, but his hand on her arm stopped her.

"We may not get out of this," he gasped. "I want you to know—"

"Don't try to talk," she begged. "You must save your strength."

But Christian ignored the warning. The pressure of his fingers increased. He pulled her closer to him until she felt his breath on her cheek. "I never meant to hurt you, Juliette. You must believe that."

But even now he could see doubt in her eyes. Angrily, he responded to it. "Damn it woman! I have raced halfway around the world for you! I've risked my life, my closest friendship! What more do you want of me?"

Juliette's unwavering look finally forced the truth from him.

"All right, damn it! I love you! Is that what you want to hear? I love you, you impossible woman!"

She was not sure if she should embrace him or slap him. The words she had so longed to hear were finally spoken, and she knew in her heart they were sincere. But, damn him, why had he waited so long? Why—? An explosion close by rocked the ship and sent her flying into his arms.

"Oh Christian!" she cried, "I'm so afraid!"

His strong arm tightened around her. "It's all right, little one," he said, soothing her as if she were a child. "It's all right."

Green eyes shining with tears looked up at him. Her bottom lip quivered as she said, "I do love you Christian . . . I do . . ."

Stephan found them like that, arms wrapped around each other, Juliette's cheek pressed against Christian's neck. It made him stop short. Written in those beautiful emerald eyes was the love she reserved only for

Christian Youngblood, the love Stephan had deceived himself into thinking might be his. Now he must face the truth and he was not prepared to deal with it.

It took agonizing minutes for him to regain control of himself. When he did, he approached them, forcing a smile to his lips.

"Ah, so there you are. I see you are still playing the nurse, eh Juliette?"

Juliette lifted weary eyes to his and recognized immediately the pain he was trying to hide. Unable to bear the sight of it, she turned her head away and buried her face in Christian's chest.

"How is it going?" Christian asked.

Stephan shrugged. "I have never known an English *capitaine* to be as smart as this one. Maybe he is a little bit French, eh?"

"He's outsmarted us then?" Christian pressed him.

"I think it is possible. That is why we must dispose of him. Without his orders, his crew will be powerless."

Reading the Frenchman's mind. Christian struggled to sit up, pushing Juliette away. "Oh no you don't," he said.

Stephan looked at him steadily. "Oh yes, *mon ami*, I do."

Muscles straining, gritting his teeth against the pain, Christian pushed himself to his feet. "I am captain of this ship and I say no!"

Juliette looked from one to the other frantically. What on earth was going on now? Were they going to lash out at each other again?

Stephan d'Ajasson refused to back down. "You cannot stop me from doing this."

"I can have you court-martialed!" yelled Christian. His face was drained of color, not so much from the pain of his wound as the pain growing in his heart.

Stephan shrugged his huge shoulders. "So?"

By degrees their conversation was taking a certain shape in Juliette's mind. When she was certain what Stephan meant to do, she clutched at Christian's sleeve.

"Don't let him do it!" she cried "Don't let him!" Tearing herself from Christian's side, she flew to the Frenchman.

"My God, don't do it! Don't go over there! Please, Stephan! *Please!*"

The big man gently traced the outline of her beautiful face with his forefinger then bent to place a warm kiss lightly on her trembling lips. Smiling tenderly at her, he whispered, "*Au revoir, chérie.*"

Juliette looked back at Christian, her eyes pleading, but he was looking at Stephan. For one intense moment blue eyes locked with gray ones. In that glance a thousand unspoken words of affection were exchanged. At last, Christian gave a stiff nod of assent. The Frenchman turned and disappeared behind the choking veil of smoke.

"*Stephan! No!*" Juliette screamed after him. The only response she received was the crackle of gunfire exploding in the air. With a cry, she turned back to where Christian stood tottering, about to fall over. Tears ran unchecked down her grimy cheeks. "Is there nothing you can do?" she begged.

Christian could barely speak. His voice choked with emotion, blue eyes staring stonily ahead, he replied, "No, there is nothing. He has made up his mind to die."

For Stephan d'Ajasson the battle had ceased to exist. It was, in fact, over and he was the loser. He strode across the battle-torn deck of the *Rebel*, stepping over the fallen bodies of his crewmates, oblivious to the sounds of battle around him. A single thought burned in his mind.

All he had ever wanted was to love her. He had brought to her what strength he had, what laughter it was within his power to put into her eyes, though he knew from the start that he had lost her to Christian Youngblood. It was not easy to think of her in the arms of a man like Trevor Kenmare; even more disturbing to imagine her with Ramir Tabori's arms wound around her naked body. But the thought of her with Christian

was the hardest to endure. He had asked nothing of her other than that she accept his friendship until she was ready to make him more than a friend. That day would never come, and he had been a fool to think it ever would.

All he had ever desired was to love her. . . . Was that so much to ask?

It was what he asked himself as he drew the saber from his side and stood with both feet on the railing of the frigate, sword in one hand, pistol in the other. In the next moment he jumped down and was swallowed up in the swirl of black biting smoke and dust. . . .

Chapter 42

Night found the sea silent again.

The frigate was beyond saving, and the great swirling vortex of water that had swallowed up the ship and her crew was now mirror-calm, reflecting no trace of the battle that had raged just hours before.

A slender figure lay atop the bunk below deck, emerald green eyes staring blankly out the mullioned windows above her head. The sky looked like an enormous jewel box spread with an immense cloth of ebony velvet and studded with millions of tiny glistening diamonds. There was one huge lustrous pearl, the moon, whose misty light floated gently earthward to skim across the silken surface of the sea.

Soon it would be dawn, but instead of finding solace in the approach of a new day, Juliette recalled with a sharp pain in her heart that Stephan had once told her how he loved to watch the dawn stealing across the sky. Choking back a sob, she turned away from the window and shut her eyes tightly in a vain attempt to stop the onrush of poignant memories.

Would she ever forget the smile behind those gray eyes? Would her ears ever cease to hear his laughter? No, she thought, she would never forget him. For as long as she lived she would always hear his voice telling her he loved her. And she would never stop loving him in that very special, tender way she had reserved only for him.

But neither would she let it consume her. Once again

she made the vow she had made to herself over and over again when faced with what seemed to be insurmountable circumstances.

Somehow she had survived it all. Looking back, Juliette marveled that she had emerged with no more than her heart scarred. Cold shivers seized her flesh when she recalled each test she'd been forced to endure which, instead of weakening her, had only added more fire to her already turbulent nature.

There had been Trevor Kenmare, the man she had married thus setting into effect a chain of agonizing events . . . Lord Alfred Clairborne whose cunningly cruel deceptions and clever lies had nearly destroyed her . . . the vicious jealousy of Aleppa and the shattering betrayal of Ishak Bey . . . inscrutable Ghiza Kemal Pasha whose life revolved around the machinery of war and who had turned her into his final conquest.

There had been the heartwrenching torment of Ramir Tabori whose offer of a throne she had rejected. . . . There had been the sacrifice of a devoted slave whose strength and affection had made her escape from the serai possible.

Each incident, each torment of the soul and heart-break had only added to her determination not to be destroyed. There was just one thing that could bring her to her knees. It had passed before her eyes in a fleeting moment just that afternoon when she had looked up in time to see Christian Youngblood wounded.

In that instant, when suddenly and horribly confronted with the very real possibility of losing him, she had realized how little anything else mattered. Now, tucking her memories away, Juliette rose on weary legs and left the cabin to look for him.

She found him on deck, staring out into the darkness. For a long while she stood unobserved in the shadows and watched him. At once her senses were filled with his presence, from the devastating good looks to the arrogance that was so much a part of him. She watched him, studying every inch of the black-haired, blue-eyed

pirate who had followed her halfway around the world, never letting her forget just how much of a woman she was.

She approached lightly, stepping gingerly over fallen debris, and came to stand beside him.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, her voice as soft as a caress.

He turned to her then, the look shadowing his eyes unreadable. "I was thinking about Trevor," he said softly.

Juliette gazed wistfully out to sea and sighed. "He must have had so many enemies."

Christian shook his head. "Time was his only enemy."

"And yours? Who . . . what . . . is your enemy?"

He remained silent for a moment. When he spoke finally, there was no hesitation in his voice. "I used to think it was the place into which I was born, so I ran as far away from it as I could. After a while, what was too painful to remember, I simply chose to forget. Then things changed. I came to think my greatest enemy was the loss of freedom, and for years I deceived myself into thinking I had something to protect. By denying my birthright, turning my back on my heritage, I enslaved myself in the prison of my own emotions. Here I've been, all these years, fighting for liberty, when I have never known freedom."

He looked down at the deck, shielding his eyes from hers. When he looked up again, the blue in them danced brilliantly. "Now all of that means nothing when I face my newest enemy . . . the thought of losing you."

He pulled his eyes from hers and turned them back to the lonely stretch of dark sea. "I've been a bloody fool," he admitted. "If only I'd told you how I felt long ago, maybe none of this would have happened."

Juliette moved closer to him and placed her hand lightly on his sleeve. She knew he was thinking of Stephan.

"You must not blame yourself, Christian. In a way, we are all casualties of this war."

Christian Youngblood looked into the emerald green eyes that had captured his very soul from the beginning and smiled. He knew that somewhere in the well of Juliette's strength he would find the courage he needed to get through this night. He put his arm around her and felt her tremble. Looking down at her, he asked, "Do you remember what I said?"

Juliette lowered her eyes and replied, "About loving me?"

Christian's laughter rippled out over water. "No, you silly woman, about making you my wife."

"Oh! But I thought that was just to get me off the island!"

A smile spread across his face and the blue eyes sparkled teasingly. "I was thinking that it might not be such a bad idea after all. So as soon as we reach Massachusetts, we'll see what we can do about making you a *real* duchess."

Her eyes opened wide. "We're not returning to France?"

"No, *ma petite*," he answered. "Not to France. We'll be making our home in America. Do you remember the house I told you about? The one in Youngstown that belonged to a friend of mine? I never had much use for it before, but now . . ." Blue eyes swept over her.

"I'll have to leave you there for a while," he went on, and saw the apprehensive look in her eyes. "It won't be for long. It's a promise I made to . . . Stephan." It was painful to say his name. "I promised him that when we reached America I would join Lafayette. Please understand, I—"

But the tenderness he saw in her eyes told Christian that she would not stand in the way of his fulfilling his promise.

"Wait until you see the house," he said, pulling her tighter into his embrace, "and the beauty of Massachusetts. I know you'll love it as much as I do."

Juliette's look turned pensive. "Massachusetts," she repeated to herself. Then, looking up at Christian, "That is where it all began, isn't it?"

Christian sighed heavily and turned his eyes back to the sea. "No, *chérie*, the revolution took place in the hearts and minds of the people long before the first shot was fired at Concord."

It was true, just as he knew that his love for this woman had taken hold of his soul long before his heart would admit it.

He felt her tremble in his arms.

"Don't look back," he whispered. "Don't ever look back. Our future lies ahead."

Bringing his face close to hers, he kissed her, using the tenderness of his lips to erase the fearful memories, and the sparkle of his eyes to repeat the promise of his love.

THROUGH THE SAVAGE TURMOIL OF HER LIFE...

Plucked as an innocent blossom from the court of the French king, Juliette le Roy struggled against abduction by her father's avowed enemy.

Escape was hers, but not before her innocence became the prize booty of the cruel and ruthless Captain Youngblood.

Soon she married a cold English lord and became mistress of a vast shipping fortune — and soon again, there to taunt her, was Christian Youngblood.

Stolen by pirates to the deserts of Anatolia and the teeming slave markets of Istanbul, she was a pampered concubine with eunuch slaves — and again appeared the face of Youngblood.

ONE MAN APPEARED AND REAPPEARED!

Returned to her husband, she assumed the proper life of an English lady. Then came a fateful duel and, with her fortune in the balance, yet again came Youngblood.

Once more she was swept by fate across the ocean to the Caribbean, engulfed by the raging revolutionary war. And still the secret spark in her heart smoldered, yearning to burn freely, to reach out to its own undeniable destiny. For always and forever — and again and yet again.

She sought to offer the dashing Youngblood this gift of her desire . . .

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**LOOK FOR TOMORROW AND FOREVER
AND TANYA, TWO RICHARD GALLEN
TITLES COMING FROM POCKET BOOKS.**